

THE BANGLADESH PARADOX

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The five decades of Bangladesh's history as an independent country present a paradox of development without democracy. An achiever in the areas of health, education, and agriculture, with an annual Gross National Income (GNI) now on the low end of the world's middle range, the country has nonetheless struggled politically as it tries to find some modicum of governmental efficiency, political accountability, and institutional stability. From 1974 through 1991 there was military rule of a highly turbulent sort, complete with coups, assassinations, and martial law. After parliamentarism's 1991 return, governance improved for a time but dysfunction soon gained the upper hand. For a while now, authoritarianism has been on the rise as well. The socioeconomic strides that the country has made without much in the way of good governance give grounds to wonder how much better it might be doing if it had a political system that was more responsive and a state that was not drowning in corruption.

The World Bank reports that Bangladesh has achieved "sustained economic growth" in recent years. In 2015, the Bank began classifying it as a "Lower Middle-Income" country. The Bank further notes that, per official estimates, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth has averaged 6.5 percent a year over the last decade, and should move Bangladesh off the UN's list of "Least Developed Countries" by 2024.¹ The garment-assembly industry and remittances from Bangladeshis working abroad have been key drivers of income growth, although the covid-19 pandemic and its consequences will likely adversely affect both income streams in the short run.

Agriculture (including food security), schooling, and health have seen key advances. With help from international donors, the Bangla-

deshi state, and NGOs, per capita rice production is up 43 percent from what it was in 1971.² In 1999, according to the most recent edition of the online *Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh* put out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (*bbs.gov.bd*), the literacy rate among people over the age of seven was 54 percent for males and 39 percent for females. In 2017, reports the *Yearbook*, those figures were 74 and 70 percent, respectively. Life expectancy at birth, just 45 years in 1960, is now 72. The UN Human Development Index (HDI), which combines life expectancy, literacy, and per capita income, records Bangladesh as the fastest-improving country in South Asia between 1990 and 2018. In sum, Bangladesh has been “punching above its weight,” registering progress in social development that puts it well above what countries with comparable per capita income have shown.³

Improvements in farming, schooling, and health took not only investment but reforms and, last but not least, direction from the central government. Foreign donors had profound influence, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, when their assistance amounted to as much as 8 percent of GNI and half the state development budget. Bangladeshi NGOs, most of them homegrown, have been a major factor as well, especially in the area of poverty alleviation. As Naomi Hossain argues, the experience of the 1974 famine—during which the country lay at the mercy of sometimes not-so-friendly donors—seems to have cemented an elite consensus, enduring across military and civilian administrations, that Bangladesh must never let itself be placed in so weak a position again.⁴ The upshot of all of the above has been that, whatever the quality of its politics, the country has had governance that has been “good enough” to deliver real progress.

During the first two decades after the independence war of 1971, when East Pakistan became Bangladesh after breaking away from West Pakistan with Indian military help, Bangladesh careened from a kind of plebiscitary democracy to authoritarian rule and back again under three successive leaders. The first was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (widely known as Mujib), the independence leader and founder who started with a legitimate electoral victory but veered sharply into authoritarianism before being massacred (along with much of his family) by junior officers in 1975. The next was army general Ziaur Rahman (usually referred to as Zia), who took power in a coup later in 1975 but gradually restored a democratic polity until his own assassination in 1981. Finally, another general, H.M. Ershad, seized power in 1982 and tried but failed to gain democratic legitimacy, ultimately resigning amid a popular uprising in 1990.

Out of these two decades of gyration emerged two major parties: the Awami League (AL) and its rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The AL began as a social-democratic, center-left (later more centrist), and secular party aligned internationally with neighboring In-

dia. The BNP was nationalist, mildly Islamic, and centrist, but markedly less friendly toward India. Both parties have long been organized internally along autocratic lines and headed by relatives of the party founders: Mujib's daughter Sheikh Hasina Wajed (b. 1947) has led the AL, while Zia's widow Khaleda Zia (b. 1945) has led the BNP.

A two-party, Westminster-style system with maximum five-year terms was introduced in 1991. This arrangement held for a bit over a decade, raising hopes that Bangladesh was on a democratic path. There were alternations in power, albeit not necessarily smooth. The BNP (allied with a fringe Islamic party) won a legitimate electoral victory in 1991, but the February 1996 election was badly flawed. Amid donor complaints, the balloting was rerun in June of the same year under a caretaker government (CTG),⁵ and the AL took the reins. The AL, together with the Jatiya Party run by General Ershad, governed until 2001, when an election under another CTG brought a BNP victory.

In the run-up to the scheduled 2006 election, the BNP undertook a series of steps seemingly meant to undermine the contest. The AL responded with a boycott, and donors again objected strenuously. On the eve of the planned election, a military-backed CTG took power in a de facto coup and spent two years making reforms in local governance, the judiciary, and the fight against corruption. Despite banning a number of party politicians, however, the CTG failed in its most important effort: to reform the top-down, autocratic parties themselves. In late December 2008, the CTG oversaw a new, internationally monitored election. The AL won handily, taking office in early 2009 with more than three-quarters of the parliamentary seats. The new AL government accepted most of the CTG-imposed reforms. Democracy, it seemed, had been restored.

Within a couple of years, however, the AL began its own effort to tilt the political playing field, most notably by abolishing the institution of the CTG for future elections. In 2014, the AL's victory was ensured when the BNP, observing the tilt, chose as the AL had back in 2006 and boycotted the voting. This time, however, donors said little. They may have felt chastened by the scant success of their 2006 intervention, and also realized that the smaller amounts of aid they were sending meant reduced leverage. Running uncontested, the AL again won more than three-quarters of the seats. Needing a formal opposition in parliament, the AL assigned the Jatiya Party this farcical role.

The BNP tried to come back by running in the 2018 election, but ended up with a mere 6 seats. Its coalition partners could only manage a pair more, for a grand total of 8. The AL and its allies, meanwhile, had fixed things to the point where they took 288 of the 300 contested seats. Human Rights Watch, the UN Human Rights Commission, and the *New York Times*, among others, denounced the violence, intimidation, and vote-rigging that lay behind these lopsided results.

In sum, the two-party democratic era saw three honest elections (1991, June 1996, and 2001) and two concerted attempts to undermine the electoral process (February 1996 and the aborted 2006 poll). During this period, the system exhibited a kind of political homeostasis in which it was able to recover itself and carry on after a party-induced infection.⁶ But after the 2008 election, democracy's prospects went into a steady downward slide. At present it would be a serious stretch to describe the country as even "competitively authoritarian."⁷

Steps in the Democratic Decline

The democratic decline in Bangladesh has antecedents that reach back to the colonial era. The downslide is complex and has at least ten dimensions that may be described as follows, starting with the oldest and longest-lasting trends first.

Hounding the media. State efforts to control the media have a long history in what is now Bangladesh, beginning with British East India Company ordinances in the 1820s and eventuating in the British viceroy's Vernacular Press Act of 1878. United Pakistan continued the tradition. Soon after the eastern portion of the country—separated from the western part by about 1,500 kilometers of Indian territory—won independence as Bangladesh, the new nation adopted the Special Powers Act of 1974. This law allowed journalists to be jailed for up to 120 days without bail or trial. Under the BNP, the Information and Communications Technology Act of 2006 stiffened regulations to include any online writing thought to be injurious to the state, individuals, religion, or law and order in general.⁸ Today the government detains journalists at will, can close websites and television stations, and may maneuver against press freedom more subtly by withdrawing government advertising, threatening to deny license renewals, or even restricting the supply of newsprint.

Politicizing civil society and the bureaucracy. Even before the democratic era began in 1991, the two major parties had powerful student wings and loosely organized social groups that could and did disrupt normal life with demonstrations—often violent—that could close down all urban activity for hours and even days at a time. After 1991, whichever party was in opposition continued and intensified the use of these *hartals* (shutdown strikes). The parties also infiltrated civil society organizations, establishing "panels" of loyalists in professional groups for lawyers, journalists, and so on. The bureaucracy too became infected, as its officials were forced to identify with one party or the other, with postings and promotions dependent on which was in power at any given time.

Using the constabulary to harass political opponents. Politicization of the bureaucracy has extended to the police as well. Ruling parties

have increasingly used them to intimidate, arrest, and jail opponents. Police have been known to disrupt opposition gatherings or stand idle as incumbent-party supporters do the disrupting, while protecting the incumbent party's assemblies. These practices, long the norm, have intensified since 2004, when the BNP government—citing the terrorist threat—chose to create a police Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). When the AL returned to office in the late 2000s, it made the RAB even stronger. Reports of torture, “disappearances,” and extrajudicial killings (officially euphemized as “encounters”) have not been unusual.

Dropping the use of neutral caretaker governments during election periods. If the antidemocratic, antiliberal practices of media harassment, politicization, and abusive policing date far back, to them can be added more recent negative developments that began under the AL about a decade ago, starting with the destruction of the CTG system. In 2011, the Supreme Court declared the neutral CTG unconstitutional, but at the same time urged that it be kept in place for the next two elections “for the safety of the state and its people.”⁹ The ruling AL had no use for such advice, however. Almost at once, it used its parliamentary supermajority to put through a constitutional amendment that abolished the CTG immediately. Incumbent parties, it was claimed, could conduct honest elections going forward. The BNP organized demonstrations demanding the CTG's return, but to no avail. In 2014 and 2018, the AL government ran the electoral process, and each time came away with a huge victory. All five current members of the Bangladesh Election Commission hold appointments from the AL government dated the same day (15 February 2017)—a circumstance that may well have been a factor in the party's lopsided 2018 victory.

Defanging the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). By the early 2000s, Bangladesh had acquired considerable notoriety as one of the world's most abysmally corrupt countries. In 2004 and 2005, according to the annual Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) published by Transparency International, it was tied with Chad and Haiti for the worst ranking in the entire survey. In part to improve Bangladesh's standing in the CPI, the BNP government created the ACC in 2004. Corruption scores did improve in the late 2000s, though Bangladesh's CPI score has yet to rise above 30 (the world's least-corrupt countries typically score in the high 80s or low 90s). The country's standing in the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) also showed improvement during the military-backed CTG that ruled from early 2007 to early 2009. The CTG strengthened the ACC, and the AL ministry that took office in January 2009 retained the upgrading. Modest improvements in corruption measures continued.

The defanging of the ACC came in 2011, when the AL passed a law requiring the Commission to obtain government permission to investigate any public servant, including any judge or member of parliament.

Since then, anticorruption progress has stalled. Bangladesh's average CPI score from 2014 through 2019 is just 26, while its standing in the WGI has eroded. The AL's approach to corruption is politicized: After the CTG ended in early 2009, the ruling AL dropped charges against its own members while pressing cases against BNP figures. After a long series of legal maneuvers, the state finally convicted BNP leader Khale-da Zia of corruption and jailed her in 2018 with a seventeen-year sentence. Her conviction disqualified her from running for office in 2018. In March 2020, she was paroled for six months. Her parole was set to expire on September 24, though in August the government clarified that she could apply for an extension.¹⁰

Hollowing out local government. Created by General Ershad in the 1980s, Bangladesh's *upazila parishad* (UZP) system provided the country with elected organs of local government at the subdistrict level (districts, of which Bangladesh has 64, are the country's main subnational units). In 1991, the incoming democracy shelved the UZPs so that members of the new parliament could control all UZP-level business in their respective constituencies. The 2007–2009 CTG reinstated the UZPs, and the AL chose to honor that decision, holding UZP elections shortly after taking office in 2009. There was a catch, however: The AL stipulated that no UZP could award development contracts (a major form of local-government patronage) without the local MP's approval. This reduced the UZP system to a shell. Bangladesh retains the form of autonomous local governance but not its substance.

Keeping the lower judiciary subservient to the executive. When Bangladesh was part of British India, the Raj kept lower courts under the executive as an instrument of colonial rule. Despite frequent promises after independence from Pakistan in 1971 to shift these courts to the Supreme Court's jurisdiction and a 1972 constitutional requirement to this end, successive governments routinely failed to arrange any such move. In 2007, the CTG issued an ordinance mandating that the lower courts be separated from the executive branch. As it did regarding the UZPs, the new AL ministry honored the severance in form but undermined it in reality. The AL mandated that district magistrates (who are officers of the executive branch) should alone have the power to initiate criminal cases, and also left judicial postings under the executive's control, notwithstanding constitutional directives to the contrary. As a result, the lower judiciary has become only nominally independent of the executive.

Controlling digital media. In 2018, the AL government passed the Digital Security Act. The restrictions on speech in this law go beyond anything seen previously in Bangladesh. As Amnesty International noted:

The new Digital Security Act under section 43 allows police in Bangladesh to arrest an individual if they believe that an offence under the law has been or is being committed or there is a possibility of committing crimes or destroying evidence.¹¹

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina defended the act, claiming that “journalists who do not provide false news need not to be worried.”¹² The AL’s performance over its decade and more in power gives pause, however. Television stations, newspapers, and websites have been threatened with closure or actually shut down. Individual journalists have been subjected to arrest or physical assault. In 2018, photojournalist Shahidul Alam was detained for more than a hundred days after reporting that police had stood by while armed gangs attacked students.¹³ That same year, opposition newspaper editor Mahmudur Rahman was assaulted by the AL’s student wing (which blamed the attack on BNP supporters).¹⁴

Skewing elections. For the losing side of a Bangladeshi election to claim fraud and demand a new vote is not uncommon. In 2018, however, stark condemnations of how the electoral process had been handled came from sources that could not be dismissed as BNP partisans. The result of the voting had been another wipeout by the AL, which together with its small allies won 96 percent of the seats. Reporters Without Borders condemned “serious press freedom violations.”¹⁵ Human Rights Watch cited a plethora of irregularities including “pre-election violence and intimidation against the opposition, attacks on opposition campaign events, ballot box stuffing, voter intimidation, and ruling party control of voting locations on election day” and called for “an independent and impartial commission” to investigate.¹⁶ The UN Human Rights Office voiced similar concerns.¹⁷ The United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union issued their own denunciations.¹⁸ A couple weeks later, the *New York Times* summed up international reactions to the election with an editorial titled “Bangladesh’s Farcical Vote.”¹⁹ The chief election commissioner insisted that “nothing happened to feel ashamed of during the election,” while Sheikh Hasina asserted that the BNP bore sole responsibility for its abysmal showing.²⁰

Delegitimizing the main opposition party. After 1991, harassment of opponents was far from unknown, but the CTGs held in check anyone’s impulses to escalate from harassment to election-rigging or attempts to eliminate opposition. Once the AL abolished the CTG system, this changed. The AL followed its 2011 constitutional amendment by ratcheting up the pressure on the BNP, aided by the latter’s miscalculation in boycotting the 2014 election. By 2018, the AL government had sent Khaleda Zia and a number of her lieutenants to jail, disqualified many BNP candidates, arrested and jailed journalists, and launched a “war on drugs” that also targeted political opponents.

By the time of the election in December 2018, there were many stories of ballot-box tampering, citizens finding that their ballots had already been cast, and polling places recording more votes than there were registered voters.²¹ The wildly lopsided result suggests that these

were not mere anecdotes—the AL coalition, as noted above, won nearly every seat. The BNP with its tiny handful of seats has yet to recover, and may well be beyond repair. Bangladesh appears to be on the road to becoming a one-party state dominated by the 73-year-old Sheikh Hasina and whoever succeeds her at the helm of the Awami League.

Democracy as a Window, Not a *Telos*?

Ever since Bangladesh achieved independence from authoritarian Pakistan, well-wishing observers and academics (myself included) have consciously or perhaps subconsciously assumed that Bangladesh was on track to becoming fully democratic. We saw Mujib's 1974 self-coup and the successive military regimes of Zia and Ershad as temporary detours. With the return to elections and civilian politics shortly after the end of the Cold War, at a time of democratic political opening across much of the world, the country's trajectory seemed clear.

True, the BNP's attempts to tilt the 1996 election in its own favor were discouraging, but the installation of the CTG and the electoral redo appeared to have fixed the problem. There was turnover; the AL took office. By the time of the 2001 election, things seemed to be going passably well on the democracy front. The voters showed the AL the door and brought the BNP back in: Had not Bangladesh thereby passed Samuel P. Huntington's famous "two-turnover test" of government peacefully changing hands twice owing to an election each time?

A decade after first trying to do so, the BNP again attempted to use its control of the government to bias an election. Once again, pressure from foreign donors and the Bangladeshi military put a CTG in place, this time for two full years. The December 2008 election brought another turnover: The AL was back in office. A second derailment had seemingly been averted, and the polity looked to be back on the democratic track. Surely the disruptions of 1996 and 2006 had been mere hiccups that could not stop the development of a system that aimed at liberal democracy as its *telos*, or ultimate state of being.

Yet before long, as recounted above, the AL embarked on its own drive to guarantee that it would remain in power following the next election. The BNP's 2014 boycott response, unlike the AL's similar moves in 1996 and 2006, failed to create the international outrage or military rumblings that the BNP was expecting. In 2018, the BNP leagued together with the Jatiya Oikya Front, a coalition founded by one of Bangladesh's most prominent prodemocracy figures, Kamal Hossein. But this was to no avail. The AL swept that year's skewed election as donors complained but did nothing and the military stayed silent. The BNP and its allies have been reduced to a wisp.

Instead of assuming (or hoping) that Bangladesh was following, even if haltingly, a path to political democracy, students of the country should

have seen that it was more a case of authoritarianism interrupted by intervals of competitive democracy than the reverse.

During and after the 1991 election, the country appeared to be a more or less reasonable liberal democracy. But then it began slipping toward the kind of soft dictatorship that in Latin America would be designated by the portmanteau word *dictablanda*. When asked about human rights shortly before the 2018 election, Sheikh Hasina said:

If I can provide food, jobs, and health care, that is human rights. What the opposition is saying, or civil society or your NGO's—I don't bother with that. I know my country, and I know how to develop my country. My biggest challenge is that no one is left behind.²²

As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue, democracies more commonly die by degrees than by coups or sudden revolutions.²³ Political freedoms and civil liberties are bit by bit repressed and eliminated, and with them goes open political competition. Such has been the case in Bangladesh. The destination need not be full-blown dictatorship. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán speaks of “illiberal democracy” as his goal: Constituencies will be gerrymandered, the media reduced to compliance, the judiciary made accommodating, and civil society tamed, but elections will be held regularly, citizens will remain free to travel, and intellectuals will be allowed to circulate their ideas to small audiences. It is not too hard to imagine Bangladesh in a similar position.

It might be tempting to imagine Sheikh Hasina following the path taken by her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in moving the polity toward autocracy, but in fact the dynamics in play are quite different. Beset within a couple years of independence by a stagnant economy, increasingly ineffective administration, mounting corruption, and dysfunctional factionalism inside the AL, all exacerbated by the serious famine of 1974, Mujib imposed a one-party state in early 1975 vesting all power in himself.²⁴ So he was acting from a position of great weakness, whereas Hasina is now operating from a position of virtually unopposed strength. Unlike her father, who was assassinated within a year of declaring one-party rule, Hasina shows every prospect of continuing in power for some time to come.

The Authoritarian State and Development

A number of authoritarian states and even outright dictatorships have done well at promoting and implementing socioeconomic development programs: China, Vietnam, and pre-1987 South Korea and Taiwan come quickly to mind. The latter two have become stable democracies since the late 1980s, and have continued to do well economically. Bangladesh, as we have seen, has made some development strides of its own, but

politically it has inverted the trajectory of harder to softer authoritarianism and then to democracy that South Korea and Taiwan followed. Bangladesh had a democratic “window” in the 1990s, but then came closure and the rise of a *dictablanda* under Sheikh Hasina and the AL. The question naturally arises: As Bangladesh continues its slide toward at least “soft” authoritarianism, can it expect its positive development performance to continue? Sheikh Hasina deflects queries about human rights with talk of delivering the developmental goods. Will her *dictablanda* in fact deliver them, and keep on doing so?

The next parliamentary election will be in late 2023 or early 2024. As of June 2020, the Asian Development Bank was predicting that Bangladesh’s rate of GDP growth would slide from 8.2 percent in 2019 to 4.5 percent in 2020, but with a recovery to 7.5 percent expected for 2021.²⁵ Thus it seems likely that Bangladesh, rebounding from the pandemic, will continue to do well as far as development goes. The AL faces little opposition. Critics of the government may enjoy editorial support from foreign sources such as the *New York Times*, but on the ground in Bangladesh they cannot do much more than mount demonstrations that the ruling party can ignore or suppress. Print and broadcast media will continue to feel state pressure. In the next national election, opposition will be allowed and even encouraged—it looks bad if only one party or coalition is on the ballot—but the regime will ensure that few oppositionists actually win seats. As for NGOs, they will broadly speaking be allowed to function so long as they avoid political advocacy.²⁶

The state thus will have a free hand to promote development with minimal oversight from the media and no real accountability to parliament, the judiciary, the electorate, or the international community. The highly centralized regime will find it relatively easy to make and implement major policy decisions. Governance will be “good enough” to get the developmental job done.

Over the middle and longer term, however, things are likely to sour. Corruption, long a serious problem, is almost certain to increase, especially given the curbs placed on the ACC. In what should be taken as an ominous portent regarding the pace of corruption, a recent study by the New York–based research firm Wealth-X forecasts that only two countries in the world will surpass Bangladesh in the next few years when it comes to the rate at which the number of individuals with high net worth increases.²⁷

Lobbies for major interests such as the garment-assembly industry will become more powerful as they press to keep safety rules in factories loose and wages down. Even after a recent increase, garment wages are reputed to be the world’s lowest.²⁸ Without media and civil society watchdogs, bad policies will go unreported, and course corrections will become difficult or even impossible.

Succession may become another serious problem, as is typically the

case for authoritarian regimes with strong leaders. In South Asia there is a tendency toward dynastic rule: Sheikh Hasina is the daughter of the country's founder, and has been widely believed to be the driving force of the patronage-based, top-down AL. The 2007–2009 CTG tried mightily to implement its “minus-two” program, aiming to depose both Hasina and the similarly placed Khaleda Zia from their posts atop their respective parties. This plan failed, however, as AL members demanded overwhelmingly that Hasina be retained while BNP partisans made the same demand with respect to Khaleda Zia. There is no reason to think this structure has changed since.

It is generally assumed that Hasina's son Sajeeb Ahmed Wazed (b. 1971) will take the AL's helm when she passes from the scene. His ascent will scarcely be meritocratic. As of 2018, he was reported to be the fourth-richest man in Bangladesh; the third-richest was said to be Tarique Rahman, the son of Khaleda Zia.²⁹ Will Sajeeb Wazed prove capable of governing Bangladesh? If he does not, there will be no system in place for selecting a replacement.

Can hope for democracy survive what looks to be a lengthy authoritarian winter? Perhaps small elite circles such as those that established the Oikya Front in 2018 can bide their time waiting for a new and more promising day. Similarly well placed to keep the flame alive may be NGOs that work at the local level and do not appear to threaten the regime. An excellent example here is Nijera Kori, an NGO that has been pursuing a low-level, small-scale, nonpartisan but activist agenda for several decades.³⁰

It is of course possible that the political dynamic of Bangladesh will turn around in the coming years, but given the trajectory toward authoritarianism, such a reversal seems unlikely. In the near term, the present government should be able to keep the development-democracy paradox in motion at or near the optimistic GDP growth rate that the Economist Intelligence Unit predicts. With about 300,000 cases among its population of 160 million as of 24 August 2020 and reported deaths around four-thousand (according to *worldometers.info*), Bangladesh seems to be weathering the covid-19 pandemic without suffering disastrous damage. Overall socioeconomic well-being will continue to improve even as wealth disparities grow sharper. At the same time, the lack of accountability will allow problems to fester, with consequences that cannot be hidden forever. In the medium and longer run, these consequences will make themselves felt. The big question is whether the pressures they create will fuel a drive for a more open and competitive political system, or stiffen the authoritarianism that already has blanketed the country.

NOTES

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