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Bangladesh is currently in the midst of a deadly political crisis. When Bangladesh was born forty-plus years ago, it was generally thought that the Achilles heel of this newly minted country will be its economy. History has, however, proved it wrong. Though the proximate cause of this current political crisis is the controversial parliamentary election of 2014 and the legitimacy of the incumbent government, its history dates back to the birth of the country. Designing a neutral institutional mechanism for holding elections, ensuring smooth transfer of power and establishing intra-party democracy—these are the obvious first steps for a procedural democracy. They will extinguish the immediate fire, but do not address the root cause of the recurrent democratic crises in the country.

Bangladesh's Democractic Challenge

M.G. QUIBRIA

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Bangladesh's Democratic Challenge

Bangladesh is currently in the midst of a deadly political crisis. Since the onset of the crisis in January, the economy has been in dire straits. According to newspaper reports, more than hundred lives (and still counting) have been lost; thousands have been wounded; and schools and colleges have remained virtually closed. The tempo of business activities, including agricultural production, has been severely disrupted; new investments, both foreign and local, have mostly evaporated; exports of manpower and garments, the lifeline of the Bangladesh economy, have suffered serious blows; and millions of dollars' worth of properties have been damaged and destroyed.

If one follows the old UNDP rule-of-thumb that political blockade costs the country 0.3 percent of GDP per day, then the country may have already lost more than 15 percent of its annual income, around 30 billion dollars, a staggering sum that is equivalent to 15 years' of foreign aid.

When Bangladesh was born forty-plus years ago, it was generally thought that the Achilles heel of this newly minted country will be its economy. History has, however, proved it wrong. After a difficult start, the nation has done well at economic development. The economy has grown at about six percent over the last two decades; its social indicators have improved significantly—even exceeding those of its neighbor, India, on many important counts. With some social stability, Bangladesh is on its way to join the ranks of middle- income countries.

This economic success notwithstanding, politics—in particular, getting the seeds of democracy to sprout— has proved daunting. In a careful comparative analysis of the quality of democracy in India and Bangladesh, Indiana University democracy- expert Sumit Ganguly (2005) concludes: while the quality of democracy has improved in India over the years, it has “regressed” in Bangladesh.

That is odd because: it is a country that emerged out of a bloody political struggle to establish democratic rights of the people; it prides itself on its ethnic and linguistic homogeneity; political progress generally accompanies economic success.

Though the proximate cause of this current political crisis is the controversial parliamentary election of 2014 and the legitimacy of the incumbent government, its history dates back to the birth of the country. The original sin of Bangladesh democracy, some experts suggest, has been its hurriedly drafted constitution in 1972 that assigned extravagant powers to the office of prime minister, a position to be assumed by its much-revered father of the nation.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the country went through a tumultuous period of experimentation with the presidential form of government, which was often been a cover-up for authoritarian regimes—both civil and military. In the 1990s, after a popular movement, the parliamentary form of government was re-established. And the arc of power shifted from the president to the prime minister, who was anointed with what used to be the unbridled power of the autocratic president. Those powers were further augmented by successive governments, which went on stifling various civil, political and human rights—allowing arbitrary arrests, unlawful deprivation of life, regulation of speech, and weak working and labor rights. With few checks and balances in the government, what emerged was an incredibly shrunken democracy with an “imperial” prime minister.

Since 1991, the government has become a duopoly of two major parties—the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) — and the position of prime minister of the country has rotated between Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. Their personal backgrounds and the way they inherited the mantle of leadership, some argue, explicates the dynamics of the post-1990 politics in Bangladesh: Their dynastic ascendance to leadership, without any political competition, sheds light on the way they run their respective parties— as family business; similarly, their personal backgrounds—once housewives, later accidental leaders— explain why debates between parties devolve into issues of political legacies than bear on important economic and social questions of the time.

There has been a coarsening of the political culture over the years. The debasement of political discourse has been so deep and wide that even major political figures now routinely speak

of “termination” and “annihilation” of opponents— or, trash talk about foreign diplomats they disfavor . In such an environment, it is no brainer why politics has attracted—except for some hardened risk-takers—few among the best and the brightest of recent generations. On the other hand, this stultifying political culture, in conjunction with the lack of governmental accountability, has yielded a bountiful harvest of political cronies, on both sides, who thrive on economic rents extracted through discriminatory access of state resources-- or even flat-out thievery of state belongings.

Not surprisingly, when in power, both parties have proved inept at governance and corrupt in administration. Under both parties, Bangladesh ranked near the top in the league of corrupt nations. In 2012, the international donors under the leadership of the World Bank cancelled a mega-loan to Bangladesh to build its longest bridge, citing concerns over corruption in the project.

When in power, both parties did their best to manipulate elections and exclude the other from power. To avert this, since 1996, Bangladesh’s parliamentary elections had been conducted by an interim neutral administration, which brought an element of accountability in a system of otherwise “appalling quality”, suggests Professor Ganguly. However, this system was abolished with an amendment to the constitution in June 2011.

In the absence of a neutral caretaker administration, the opposition BNP and its allied parties apprehended widespread rigging and decided not to participate in the 2014 parliamentary elections. In a country so besotted with polls and politics, perhaps more than anywhere in the world, the elections had little voter participation—and out of 300 seats, 154 were unchallenged.

The leader of the opposition Khaleda Zia has vowed that her party and its allies will continue the ongoing blockade until the government agrees to hold a free and fair early election.

Even if the government succeeds in crushing this current political turmoil, this does not spell the end of the crisis. The crisis will fester as the opposition commands as at least as much political support from the people as the government. (Neither party has commanded a majority of votes when both contested.) If, however, the government acquiesces to the demands of the opposition, it will bring only a temporary relief to the current crisis, as they do not address the country's fundamental democratic deficits that metastasized over the years.

Designing a neutral institutional mechanism for holding elections, ensuring smooth transfer of power and establishing intra-party democracy—these are the obvious first steps for a procedural democracy. They will extinguish the immediate fire, but do not address the root cause of the recurrent democratic crises in the country: the absence of an infrastructure of a viable liberal democracy.

A liberal democracy needs to be built on the foundation of a capable state, rule of law and government accountability, writes Stanford Political Scientist Francis Fukuyama (2014), a world-class expert on problems of weak and failed states, in his magisterial works on democracy. In Bangladesh, to build such an institutional infrastructure, there must be reforms to ensure the true independence of the judiciary, to nurture a non-politicized merit-based bureaucracy and to roll-back the much-abused emergency powers of the executive. Constitutional bodies like the Election Commission and the Anticorruption Commission need to be independent, rather than being the handmaidens of the party in power. As independent international watch-dog organizations have repeatedly of the chilling acts of human rights violations of the security forces of the country, they need to be independently investigated— and then, be either dismantled or brought under a strict legal framework.

All this is a tall order even for a competent, well-meaning government. It requires a fundamental 'reset' of politics, which is particularly challenging in the current hyper-partisan, vile political environment. Therefore, unless there is a groundswell of enlightened leadership on

both sides, prospects for reforms in Bangladesh to consolidate and deepen democracy may be remote in the near future.

However, failure is no option. Any rational leader should realize that politics is the art of compromise, and not of confrontation. An obstinate attempt by one side to prevail over the other by force would be futile, as any such victory would be both pyrrhic and temporary. On the other hand, political compromise would be in the best interest of the nation: it will spare the nation of the periodic bouts of mayhem that impede the pace of economic and social progress. And this will also set the two leaders free—who themselves are invisible prisoners of an illiberal system—to gracefully recede into the golden sunset without being concerned about their political legacy or their personal safety.

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