
Political Statecraft in Bangladesh: Plights and Perils

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From the way our politicians are reverting to age-old mode of confrontation and destruction, one can safely come to the conclusion that what is pain for the people is fun for the politicians of Bangladesh. Political scientists can now very easily claim an established discourse insofar as politics in Bangladesh is concerned and that is - collision course. Yes, our politicians are, perhaps, not even aware that in politics there is a conciliation course as well. While the opposition political parties are calling ineffective and suicidal hartals, the ruling party is fuelling the situation with gratuitous yet motivated invective. Their philosophical orientation and psychological configuration have become such that they seem to be resolute in their resolve not to change till the doomsday. In fact, Bangladesh is faced with governance challenges for long.¹

It is obvious that good governance is a must for the development and growth of a nation.² And, the most important distinction among countries relates not to their form of government but to their degree of government.³ The tumultuous politics and politicized state institutions have always had a bearing

on governance and Bangladesh case was hardly an exception. As government has to function through various systems and processes of the government machinery and private initiatives, the precondition is that the machinery and processes be good, flexible, sound, efficient, cost-effective and objective in approach. A nation's governance plays the vital role in shaping the destiny of its people.⁴

In Bangladesh, both alliances are so absorbed in the delusion of state power that they fail to reach even a modicum of compromise, which is inarguably the cornerstone of democracy. Painfully enough, despite rhetorical commitment and prolonged struggles to establish democracy, the political parties of Bangladesh have miserably failed to establish a consensus over the ground rules for democratic competition and dissent.⁵

Moreover, it is no wonder that such politics breeds a politicized bureaucracy and a malfeasant system of law and order. And, these instruments of governance, operating without accountability and transparency, leads to the machinery of state being used as a political resource rather than an instrument of governance.⁶ However, what else can an ordinary citizen of the country infer from the attitudes and behaviours our political leaders showed in the past and are showing these days? Some of the recent predicaments of Bangladesh politics and state machinery are being discussed below under different rubrics.

Scrapped Caretaker

Is caretaker not a caricature of our decomposed political culture? Does it not blatantly betray some poor qualities of our politicians which include jugglery, bankruptcy and skullduggery? It is really difficult to grasp how it can be sour when it was once sweet and vice versa. While the gimmickry centering round caretaker system is poised to become kind of tragedy at home,

actions for and against it must have become comedy of errors in the eyes of the global observers.⁷

The love and fear of caretaker system transpires that it seems very juicy if it promises to fetch power and that it is rather obnoxious if it threatens to snatch power. Though our leaders tend to pile up arguments as and when situation demands, they are quite adept in changing positions once they find themselves cramped in the game, the only rule of which is win, even through a walkover. The reason is obvious: Healthy competition is not their way of life.

They are rather intent on capitalising on systematic commotion to fish in troubled water. That is why, I must say, they broke seniority in appointing a Chief Justice so as to make him the next Chief Adviser and paid at the end of the day. Other group, then, increased the retirement age of Supreme Court judges only to get the desired person to head the next Caretaker government. As a result, the country landed in a prolonged emergency.

Prior to assigning the country's future to the army-backed caretaker government, however, one group made a mockery of the caretaker system by forcing a partisan President to take the helms of a non-party Caretaker Government. The old fellow, already burdened with Presidency, then, started toeing the line of the leadership to whom he was loyal. Shortly, afterwards, chaos and turmoil threatened to mar everything civic.

Quite dramatically, now, the caretaker system has become an anathema for one group and they have scrapped the system for which they once paralyzed the country with mass movements. In other camp, however, crocodile tears do not cease to climb down for the system which was for them once an absurd system to be

manned by neutral people, though in their terms, there is no neutral person in the country other than children and lunatics.

So, the stage is again set for more rounds of jokes which are real for the ones who see and cruel for the ones who feel. Currently, one group is committed to upholding the verdict of Supreme Court which declared the Caretaker provision unconstitutional though there is an option of holding two more elections under Caretaker Government. The opposing cartel has, however, gone back to the hackneyed protest mechanism - hartal - even before making their objection registered in the parliament.

Table 1
Violence and Elections in Bangladesh

Elections	% of Voter turnout	Election postponed		Nature of violence	
		Constituency	Centre	No. of clashes (pre-election)	No. of deaths (election day)
Ninth	----	----	----	----	----
Eighth	74.8	16	90	144	3
Seventh	74.9	27	123	na	4
Fifth	55.4	12	30	na	1
Fourth	52.5	na	23	19	7
Third	61.1	na	284	221	32
Second	51.3	na	63	122	18
First	54.9	na	56	85	13

Source: Ahmed, 2004:92; Note: '----' means data not available

Though caretaker system has badly exposed credibility crisis of our major political parties in holding free and fair general elections, there is little dissent as to the fact that this is indeed a political issue. Judicial intervention, not voluntary though, has made the situation rather complex. However, the intention of the judiciary seems pretty honest and pragmatic and that is to keep judges aloof from heading the non-party Caretaker Government.

This is not the case that the rival camps have failed to grasp this simple connotation, but they are just playacting. The group that is now opposing the caretaker system could have waited at least couple of years and avoided handing the rivals an issue to agitate on. On the other hand, the ones, who are now going for senseless strikes, also could have waited and let the people live in peace for some time without subjecting them to the rigours of political enmity.

True, caretaker system is an interim arrangement and cannot be in place for ever. Election Commission should be made capable and strong enough to hold general elections as elsewhere in the world. There is, then, the apprehension that the opposing camp might raise a question as to the people that would man the Election Commission. The crux of the problem is nothing new: incalculable mistrust between the rival camps.

Is it not pitiable that we have not yet been able to put in place a viable mechanism for peaceful transition of power? Caretaker system was experimentation. Even the proponents of the system have now taken an about turn. Thinkers have already termed the country as a land of 'nothing impossible'. Are not our leaders' mutual skepticism, manipulation and engineering turning the country into a land of 'nothing works'?

Politicized Law

POLICE stands for being polite, obedient, loyal, intelligent, courageous and efficient. Police also encapsulates the idea of 'protection of life in civil establishment'. The ghastly scene of trampling of a person by a police man during the recent hartal is, I think, another reminder of the fact that people of the land are destined to be trampled not only by the politicians but also by the police, other law enforcing bodies and so on.

To what extent is majority of our police force polite, obedient, loyal, intelligent, courageous and efficient though all members of the force are not tarred with the same brush? How much are the police men oriented towards protection of life in civil establishment in our context? On balance and reflection, however, it is not at all difficult to get answers to these definitive questions.

Though the people belonging to this crucial law enforcing body might have their versions of explanation, public perception about the same is anything but good and the people have the final say no matter whether you are ready to accept or not. It is common knowledge that our police force fares really badly in terms of remaining obedient, loyal, intelligent, courageous and efficient in most cases.⁸

Unfortunately, moreover, they were badly exposed as the most corrupt institution followed by the civil service, political party and the judiciary in Bangladesh in the Transparency International Bangladesh or TIB's first ever public opinion survey. Interestingly, this was the first time Bangladesh had been included in the yearly survey initiated in 2003 covering 44 countries.

The break-up elaborates that 79 percent of Bangladeshis, surveyed in the report, believe the police are the most corrupt public service institution followed by the public service (68 percent), political party (58 percent), the judiciary (43 percent) and parliament (32 percent). Bangladesh, however, tops the list insofar as victims of petty corruption in key public service sectors are concerned.

According to the findings,⁹ bribe has engulfed key public service institutions in Bangladesh with 76 percent of the respondents pointing at police as the key bribe collector while 64 of them gave the judiciary the second position followed by the

land service (48 percent), registry and permit service (47 percent), utilities (34 percent), educational system (28 percent) and medical service (18 percent).

True, like all other state employees of the land, police are also underpaid. The facilities and resources available in the police stations are also meagre. It has been learnt that the police men even have to manage fuel for their vehicles and other essential resources on their own as governmental allocations for the same are grossly insufficient. Can they still justify their dilapidated moral standing in view of all the considerations?

Recent trampling of a person by a police man might be claimed to be an isolated incident perpetrated by a less educated police man. Conscious citizens of the land are, however, very aware of the fact that this is the order of the day in contemporary Bangladesh. Harassment of general people in the hands of the members of the law enforcing agencies is just a regular phenomenon in our country. Table 2 gives a picture of law-enforcers lawlessness in the country.

Table 2
Extrajudicial Killings by year

Law Enforcement Agencies	2012	2011	2010	2009
RAB	40	43	68	41
Police	18	31	43	75
RAB-Police	2	4	9	25
RAB-Coast Guard	4	4	3	0
Jail Police	1	2	0	1
Ansar	3	0	0	2
BGB	2	0	1	5
Army	0	0	0	3
RAB-Police-Coast -Guard	0	0	3	0

Forest Guard	0	0	0	1
Coast Guard	0	0	0	1
Total	70	84	127	154

Source: *Odhikar, 2012: 49*

Politicians, however, use the police. And, therein lies the mortal indulgence of our politicians. Ruling party politicians relish such scenes when the opposition party supporters become the victims. They forget it altogether that their turns may also arise with the change in state power. In the process, however, they just rear up Frankenstein who would no doubt jump upon the makers availing the next possible opportunity.

Truly, political use of security personnel has reached unmanageable proportions in contemporary Bangladesh. A bird's eye view of our newspapers' reports and electronic media bulletins are apt enough to give us a clear idea as to police atrocities during hartals and other political programmes. Though police forces are meant for keeping law and order, their excesses verge on gross violation of human rights in many cases.

Perhaps, due to regimentation and dehumanisation orientation, the police men already have a tendency to brutalise the public while they are ordered to beat the same. Meanwhile, death in police custody is also increasing. Members of the law enforcing agencies have every right to go tough for the sake of maintaining law and order. Under no circumstances, however, they have any right to crush a person under boot. Such a spectacle points to state's bankruptcy to a degree.

The key people in our police force cannot sit idle. Damage of image cannot be allowed to go on. Perpetual inertia might prove fatal. While the whole world is changing, the key law enforcing agency cannot just wallow in politicians' motivated indulgence. Political use of police force resulting in their brutalities should

also come to a stop forthwith, which requires political will, to salvage the flagging image of this essential security organ.

Unsecured Media

The murder of Sagar and Runy, two renowned journalists, has created unprecedented sensation in the country during the contemporary period.¹⁰ Instead of any soothing effect being added to it in the wake of relentless movements of the journalists of all complexions, the agony have just been extended and worsened.

Big shots of the government gave promises after promises with no result as yet. Even the dead bodies of both the victims were exhumed for better probe after three months of their killing. However, the countrymen men have seen a lot so far. The Home Minister gave assurance of arresting the killers within 24 hours of the killing. The IGP claimed substantial progress in the probe and the police claimed to have found the motive behind the killing.

Meanwhile, after nearly two and half months, the police sought relief from handling the case admitting its failure. It is indeed a harsh reminder of the extent to which our accountability has reached in the national setting. How can a crucial state organ collecting salary from the state exchequer admit its failure so brazenly? What is the level of its efficiency and integrity?

It is difficult to say whether the Sagar-Runy murder case would be benefitted from the recent hullabaloo. However, many think that the unity of the journalists' community might be hampered. Veteran journalist ABM Musa has very rightly emphasised on the journalists' harmony reached following the gruesome murder of Sagar Sarwar and Meherun Runy. He also urged upon the journalists not to betray with the blood of Sagar and Runy.

Admittedly, journalists have for long become targets of killing. Unfortunately, trial of killing of no journalist has yet taken place in the country. After killing of Sagar and Runy, journalists were able to wax a consensus which promised really well for the community. However, the recent happenings, especially punitive action against ten journalists, might undermine the cohesion among the journalists.

Table 3
Treatment of media in Bangladesh

Year	Killed	Injured	Assaulted	Attacked	Arrested	Abducted	Threatened	Tortured	Sued	Misc.	Total
2009	3	84	45	16	1	2	73	0	23	19	266
2010	4	118	43	17	2	1	49	0	13	16	263
2011	0	139	43	24	1	0	53	0	23	8	291
2012	5	161	50	10	0	0	63	2	36	15	342
Grand Total	12	502	181	67	4	3	238	2	58	58	1162

Source: Odhikar, 2012: 22

Sacrificed Humanity

Round the clock live coverage of heroic rescue operations in Savar tragedy must have touched every human soul in the country and even many, not related to Savar tragedy, could not resist their tears watching harrowing scenes of fellow brothers and sisters. While rescue of a living worker made the viewers elated, rescue of dead bodies forced tears.¹¹

With the garments sector booming in the country, poor people of the country found a niche for maintaining their life in exchange for labour. Unfortunately, however, terrible accidents and fatal casualties therein have become real dangers for their life and livelihood with the latest disaster taking place at Savar. The palpable main culprit Sohel Rana has been captured. A round of blame game can be played centering round the Rana plaza tragedy at Savar.

However, one point has to be borne in mind so that our garments sector does not become the ultimate loser in the whole affair. Sohel Rana is no doubt a greedy customer. However, the painful fact is that Bangladesh has already become a safe haven for Sohel Ranas. Arrest of Sohel Rana was unavoidable. But, cinematic coverage of Sohel Rana's movements looked rather odd. As godfathers are moving around freely, showoff of mere capture of a minnow like Sohel Rana is simply vexing.

Admittedly, Rana plaza is not the only building in the country which has been built bypassing the building codes. As newspaper papers reports come in, there is existence of thousands of such commercial and residential buildings in the country which have been erected in collaboration of owners, engineers and government officials. In fact, such criminal activities have been going on for long in the country with the only motive of shortcut profit.

In fact, human casualties at Savar could have been avoided had the signals been heeded just before the day of the incident. As a Bank office situated in the building was declared closed following the signal of cracks at a wall, the lives of the office employees could be saved. However, the garment owners and the management with the assurance of the building owner Sohel Rana forced the poor workers to meet with the fate they received.

Reportedly, two cases filed in this regard have been flimsy. However, are the building owner and the garments owners not primarily responsible for so many deaths and casualties? Then, why no one indicted them for this gruesome deaths, or rather, murders? Many people and the media alike have branded the deaths at Rana plaza tragedy as wholesale murder of poor people, and very rightly so.

Rana plaza tragedy again remind us of the agonising fact that lives of the poor people of the country are valueless to the rich and the powerful. Around 1100 dead bodies were recovered from the rubble of the collapsed building with, reportedly, 1000 more missing. However, more than 2500 workers were rescued alive for which the rescuers, especially the volunteers who risked their lives for saving and rescuing workers, deserve appreciation and salutation. Though a lot of the rescued people have thankfully been rescued in one piece, many have turned crippled.

Many are now running to help the Savar victims. However, the real succor is yet to come and that is rehabilitation of the people who have lost their hands, feet and other essential organs. Media reports pour in where it is being commented, painfully though, that returning alive yet mutilated has become a curse for many. Moreover, many have lost their earning members. If they are not rehabilitated, they will have no option but to go for street begging. It is to be noted that none of them chose begging in the first place.

If they are forced to earn living by begging, the whole of society will definitely fail miserably in its duties. Thus, the state machinery, BGMEA and the affluent sections of the society will have to act decisively in this regard. If the state and the capable ones cannot ensure proper rehabilitation of the victims, the concerned will prove themselves simply redundant in context of governance and social responsibility.

More importantly, some of the buildings have already developed cracks. Some have been ordered to be demolished. However, there is always the danger that all the orders and pressures might evaporate once the media focus on Rana plaza is over. However, there is no alternative to giving credence to the current realisation that all these risky buildings would have to be repaired or removed if the concerned do not want those

establishments to become death traps. No more platitude; only decisive action can ward off future disasters.

Compromised Governance

Good governance is, among other things, participatory, transparent and accountable. It is also effective and equitable, and promotes the rule of law fairly. Good governance ensures that the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable are heard in decision-making over the allocation of development resources, and that political, social and economic priorities are based on broad consensus among the three stakeholders the state, private sector and civil society. UNDP identifies nine core characteristics which measure good governance.

The nine core traits are participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus-orientation, equity, effectiveness and efficiency, accountability and strategic vision. Our political leaders cry hoarse for establishing good governance in the country if voted to power. While in power, however, even the core governance issues tend to elude them. The opposition invariably blames the treasury bench for bad governance. Following discussion will subsume an analysis of the core characteristics in our context.¹²

Participation

All men and women should have a voice in decision-making, either directly or through legitimate intermediate institutions that represent their interests. In our country, people nowadays can exercise their right to vote once in five years. They vote one party to power and another sits in the opposition. However, in our country the winner runs the country with little regard for the opposition and the opposition boycotts the parliament quite routinely.

Participation is built on freedom of association and speech, as well as capacities to participate constructively. What do we see in Bangladesh? The ruling party hardly allows the opposition to raise voice against it. A marauding tendency to mute the dissenting voices engulfs the ruling party bosses. They use the police and other machineries to gag whoever opposes. The opposition party, however, does not relax. It resorts to deadly activities such as violence, arson, etc.

Rule of law

Legal frameworks should be fair and enforced impartially, particularly the laws on human rights. In our context, exercise of the framework is still not fair enough for all, the strong and the weak. Things become more precarious when execution of laws is manipulated on political considerations. Arm-twisting of legal provisions and law enforcing agencies by the incumbent and the strong turns the issue of rule of law mere paper on words most of the time. And, extra-judicial killings remain a constant stigma on the face of our catchphrase of rule of law.

Transparency

Transparency is built on the free flow of information. Processes, institutions and information have to be directly accessible to those concerned with them, and enough information is to be provided to understand and monitor them. Prior to enactment of Right to Information Act, the matter of transparency was only in the air in the country. However, the issue has not got prominence even after promulgation of this much-vaunted Act. Attitudinal change is still a bare necessity in this regard. For being prepared to be transparent, the state organs will have to perform things in the best interests of the citizens and the country. Personal and political interests, however, still dominate our leaders and administrators and the matter of transparency gets overridden.

Responsiveness

Institutions and processes should try to serve all stakeholders. In this regard, things must have changed as far as our officialdom is concerned. An effort on the part of the midlevel and local level officials is quite evident to try to serve the stakeholders of all sorts. However, such officials have to remain more responsive towards the bosses in which activity a bulk amount of their time is spent. Without being more and more responsive towards the citizens, no administration can become pro-people. Thus, the effort must be on.

Consensus Orientation

Good governance mediates different interests to reach a broad consensus on what is in the best interest of the group and, where possible, on policies and procedures. Our administrators, especially at the grassroots levels, are much involved in the function of consensus-building among the conflicting groups and interests in the society. Abysmal lack of consensus among our political parties, however, is quite discouraging for the bureaucrats.

Equity

All men and women should have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being. This is a glaring issue in our country. As the country is resource-constraint, the crisis hits the countrymen in its true sense. Our leaders and incumbents are expected to utilise the resources sparingly. Quite the reverse, however, takes place in their actions. Misuse of public money for personal and political purposes is quite common with our leaders and bureaucrats. And, the ultimate sufferers are none other than the general people.

Effectiveness and Efficiency

Processes and institutions produce results that meet needs while making the best use of resources. The cardinal issues of governance such as effectiveness and efficiency are not yet given due importance in our national setting. Though some ministries of the country are doing really well, some ministries are constantly overshadowing the good deeds. If a good number of ministries were really effective and efficient, the picture of the country would be really rosy.

Accountability

Decision-makers in government, the private sector and civil society organisations are accountable to the public, as well as to the institutional stakeholders. Though this is the cornerstone of good governance, this can be called the most neglected issue in the overall scheme of things of our incumbents. So, the society is becoming increasingly unlivable. Due to lack of justice in the society, some people are becoming and behaving wayward. Recent brutalisation of the society is nothing but the outcome of a society devoid of accountability at all levels.

Strategic Vision

Leaders and the public have a broad and long-term perspective on good governance and human development, along with a sense of what is needed for such development. Our major political parties came to power with broad visions. The vision of the current government led by Awami League is Vision 2020. Achievements are there in pursuance of the vision. The rate of progress, however, could have been better had there been concerted efforts. The matter of one party's vision being jettisoned by the rival political group is, however, a real danger in our political culture.

Conclusions

Good governance, since ancient times, has been conceptualized as an ideal state. This notion endures even now, as good governance is seen to bring in happiness and welfare of the people. It is also associated with efficient and effective administration in a democratic framework.¹³ Every time elections take place in Bangladesh with the hope of transition from one generation of politicians to the next so that corruption lessens and good prospects for effective governance prevail.¹⁴ However, frustration becomes the ultimate result more often than not.

Crisis of governance in Bangladesh is hard to go.¹⁵ With the passage of time, things seem to be becoming increasingly intricate. While political leaders and goons are flexing their muscles and blood-thirsty criminals are eyeing kind of bloodbath, concerns among the citizenry are just snowballing. It is needless to say that our politics has been degenerated to the greatest possible extent. And, common people can hardly expect anything good from the crooked political elements.

However, it is not too much for them to want to stay away from the endless bickering and bloodshed our politics tends to produce. To many, it is a vice to be pessimistic. But, why should one be optimistic in view of the current political hullabaloo and turmoil? For getting their demands fulfilled and desires achieved, political leaders of all colours seem to have decided to stoop to anything. They have held the whole nation hostage to their whims and guiles. No respite seems in sight. A dreadful tomorrow looms large in the horizon. Ominous signs are already there.

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