



Bangladesh: Challenges to Democracy and Governance

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Abstract:

This paper examines the complex challenges facing democracy and governance in Bangladesh, a country that has made significant progress since its independence in 1971. Despite its achievements, Bangladesh's democracy is hindered by intense political polarization, institutional weaknesses, human rights concerns, economic development challenges, and external influences. This research provides an in-depth analysis of these challenges, exploring how they impact democratic governance and consolidation. The study reveals that political polarization between the two dominant parties has led to a decline in effective governance, while institutional weaknesses have eroded trust in the judiciary, parliament, and other key institutions. Human rights concerns, including restrictions on freedom of speech and press, have raised international concerns. Economic development, though impressive, is marred by corruption, which undermines democratic governance. The paper also explores the impact of external influences, including regional and global factors, on Bangladesh's democracy. The research highlights the need for comprehensive reforms to address these challenges and strengthen democratic governance. It concludes by recommending measures to promote inclusive politics, institutional reforms, human rights protection, economic development, and regional cooperation to ensure a resilient and sustainable democracy in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Democracy, Development, Bangladesh, Politics, Governance, Human rights, Corruption.

I. Introduction:

Bangladesh, a country born out of a bloody liberation war in 1971, has made significant strides in its democratic journey. Since its transition from military rule to democracy in 1990, Bangladesh has held regular elections, expanded political participation, and made notable economic progress, with GDP growth averaging over 6% annually. The country has also made significant strides in human development, with improvements in healthcare, education, and poverty reduction. However, beneath this façade of democratic consolidation, Bangladesh's political landscape is fraught with complex challenges that threaten to undermine its hard-won democratic gains. Intense political polarization, marked by bitter rivalries between the ruling Awami League and opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has led to a decline in political dialogue and cooperation. Institutional weaknesses, including a politicized bureaucracy and a compromised judiciary, have eroded trust in the government's ability to deliver justice and services. Human rights concerns, such as enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, have raised international concerns. Economic development challenges, including corruption, inequality, and a heavy reliance on foreign aid, have also taken a toll on the country's democratic governance. Furthermore, external influences, including regional and global power dynamics, have added to

the complexity of Bangladesh's democratic landscape, raising pressing questions about the resilience and sustainability of democracy in this strategically important South Asian nation.

1. Brief overview of Bangladesh's democratic journey

- 1971: Bangladesh gains independence from Pakistan through a bloody liberation war.
- 1972-1975: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the country's founding father, serves as Prime Minister, but his government is marked by authoritarianism and corruption.
- 1975-1990: Military rule and authoritarian governments dominate Bangladesh's political landscape.
- 1990: Bangladesh transitions to democracy with the fall of General Ershad's military regime.
- 1991: The first free and fair elections are held, won by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).
- 1996: The Awami League (AL) comes to power, led by Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
- 2001: The BNP returns to power, led by Khaleda Zia.
- 2007-2008: A military-backed caretaker government takes over, leading to widespread protests.
- 2009: The AL returns to power, with Sheikh Hasina becoming Prime Minister.
- 2014: The AL wins a controversial election, boycotted by the BNP.
- 2018: The AL wins a third consecutive term, amidst allegations of vote rigging and repression of opposition.

2. Thesis statement: Despite progress, Bangladesh's democracy faces significant challenges that need to be addressed.

Bangladesh's democratic journey has been marked by significant progress, including the transition from military rule to democratic governance in 1990, which paved the way for regular elections, expansion of political participation, and improvement in human development indicators such as healthcare, education, and poverty reduction. The country has also made notable economic progress, with GDP growth averaging over 6% annually, and has become a key player in regional and global affairs. However, beneath this façade of democratic consolidation, the country's political landscape is fraught with complex challenges that threaten to undermine its hard-won democratic gains. Political polarization, marked by bitter rivalries between the ruling Awami League and opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has led to a decline in political dialogue and cooperation, while institutional weaknesses, including a politicized bureaucracy and a compromised judiciary, have eroded trust in the government's ability to deliver justice and services.

Thesis Statement:

“Despite notable progress in democratic governance, economic development, and human well-being, Bangladesh's democracy is imperilled by deep-seated challenges, including entrenched political polarization, institutional fragility, persistent human rights abuses, significant economic disparities, and external pressures, which necessitate comprehensive reforms to ensure the resilience and sustainability of democratic governance, prevent democratic backsliding, and promote inclusive and equitable development.”

II. Political Polarization

Bangladesh's democratic landscape is increasingly fragmented, with political polarization reaching alarming levels. The intense rivalry between the ruling Awami League (AL) and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has resulted in a binary political environment, where compromise and consensus are scarce.

The roots of this polarization can be traced back to the country's tumultuous history, with the AL and BNP representing two distinct ideological camps. The AL, led by Sheikh Hasina, is perceived as a champion of secularism and progressive values, while the BNP, led by Khaleda Zia, is seen as a proponent of Islamist and nationalist ideologies. This ideological divide has fueled a bitter struggle for power, with each side seeking to discredit and delegitimize the other.

As a result, Bangladesh's political discourse has become increasingly divisive, with both sides engaging in inflammatory rhetoric and violence. This has created a toxic environment, where dissent is suppressed, and opposition voices are silenced. The consequences of this polarization are far-reaching, threatening to undermine the very foundations of democracy in Bangladesh.

1. Political landscape and rivalries

The political landscape in Bangladesh is dominated by two major parties: the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). These parties have a long and complex history, with roots dating back to the country's independence movement.

The AL, led by Sheikh Hasina, has traditionally been associated with secular and progressive values, while the BNP, led by Khaleda Zia, has been linked to Islamist and nationalist ideologies. This ideological divide has fuelled a bitter rivalry between the two parties, with each side seeking to assert its dominance over the other.

The rivalry between the AL and BNP has been marked by periods of intense violence, including clashes between party supporters, attacks on opposition leaders, and allegations of electoral manipulation. This has created a culture of fear and intimidation, where opposition voices are silenced, and dissent is suppressed.

Key features of the political landscape and rivalries:

- Ideological polarization: AL (secular, progressive) vs. BNP (Islamist, nationalist)
- Personalized leadership: Sheikh Hasina (AL) vs. Khaleda Zia (BNP)
- History of violence: clashes, attacks, electoral manipulation
- Culture of fear and intimidation: opposition voices silenced; dissent suppressed
- Patronage politics: parties reward loyal supporters with jobs, contracts, and favours
- Weak institutional checks: judiciary, election commission, and parliament compromised

2. Impact on governance and decision-making

The intense political polarization in Bangladesh has significantly impacted governance and decision-making in the country. Some of the key effects include:

1. **Political Gridlock:** The bitter rivalry between the AL and BNP has led to a decline in political dialogue and cooperation, resulting in a gridlock that hinders effective governance.
2. **Partisan Decision-Making:** Key decisions are often made based on partisan interests rather than the greater good, leading to policies that benefit specific groups rather than the broader population.
3. **Weak Institutional Checks:** The politicization of institutions such as the judiciary, election commission, and parliament has compromised their ability to provide effective checks and balances on the executive.
4. **Patronage Politics:** The focus on rewarding loyal supporters with jobs, contracts, and favours has led to a culture of patronage politics, undermining meritocracy and good governance.
5. **Delayed Policy Implementation:** Political polarization has resulted in delayed implementation of key policies and projects, as decisions are often held hostage to partisan interests.
6. **Lack of Accountability:** The absence of effective opposition and weak institutional checks have led to a lack of accountability, allowing corruption and abuse of power to flourish.
7. **Political Instability:** The intense rivalry between the AL and BNP has created an environment of political instability, with frequent clashes, protests, and changes in government.

These factors have collectively undermined the effectiveness of governance and decision-making in Bangladesh, hindering the country's ability to address pressing development challenges and ensure inclusive growth.

III. Institutional Weaknesses

Bangladesh's democratic framework is built on a foundation of institutions designed to provide checks and balances, ensure accountability, and uphold the rule of law. However, a combination of factors has led to the erosion of institutional strength, compromising their ability to perform these critical functions. The politicization of institutions, lack of autonomy, and inadequate capacity have all taken a toll on their effectiveness.

The country's key institutions, including the judiciary, election commission, parliament, and civil service, have been increasingly compromised, leading to a decline in public trust and confidence. The judiciary, once seen as a bastion of independence, has faced allegations of political interference, while the election commission has struggled to ensure free and fair polls. Parliament, intended to be a vibrant forum for debate and oversight, has become a rubber stamp for the ruling party, and the civil service has been criticized for its lack of neutrality and professionalism. This weakening of institutions has far-reaching consequences for democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law in Bangladesh.

1. Examination of the judiciary, parliament, and other key institutions

The judiciary in Bangladesh has faced numerous challenges, including:

- i. Political interference: Allegations of government influence over judicial appointments and decisions have raised concerns about the judiciary's independence.
- ii. Lack of independence: The judiciary's autonomy has been compromised by executive pressure, resulting in a decline in public trust.
- iii. Inefficient case management: Delays and backlog of cases have undermined public trust and confidence in the judiciary's ability to deliver justice.

Parliament, intended to be a vibrant forum for debate and oversight, has been criticized for:

- i. Weak opposition: The lack of an effective opposition has limited scrutiny of government actions, allowing the ruling party to dominate proceedings.
- ii. Limited debate: Restricted discussion and lack of engagement on key issues have reduced parliament's effectiveness.
- iii. Rubber-stamp decisions: Parliament often approves government proposals without thorough examination, undermining its role in holding the executive accountable.

Other key institutions, such as the:

- i. Election Commission: Struggles to ensure free and fair polls, amidst allegations of bias and incompetence, have raised concerns about the legitimacy of elections.
- ii. Civil Service: Criticized for lack of neutrality and professionalism, with appointments often based on political loyalty rather than merit.
- iii. Anti-Corruption Commission: Faces challenges in investigating and prosecuting high-profile cases, due to limited resources and political pressure, undermining its effectiveness.

These institutional weaknesses have far-reaching consequences, including:

- i. Erosion of public trust and confidence in institutions
- ii. Undermining of democratic governance and the rule of law
- iii. Lack of accountability and transparency in government decision-making
- iv. Inefficient delivery of public services and goods, exacerbating poverty and inequality

A comprehensive examination of these institutions reveals a pressing need for reforms to strengthen their autonomy, capacity, and accountability, ensuring they can effectively perform their roles in supporting democratic governance in Bangladesh. This includes measures such as judicial reform, parliamentary strengthening, electoral reform, and anti-corruption efforts.

2. Analysis of their effectiveness and areas for improvement

Judiciary

The judiciary in Bangladesh faces significant challenges in maintaining its independence and effectiveness. To improve, the judiciary should:

- Increase independence from executive influence by establishing a clear separation of powers
- Improve case management efficiency through modernization and streamlining of court processes
- Enhance transparency and accountability by publishing judicial decisions and ensuring access to court information

Parliament

Parliament in Bangladesh requires strengthening to effectively perform its oversight and representative functions. To achieve this, parliament should:

- Strengthen opposition parties through electoral reforms and ensuring a level playing field
- Encourage robust debate and scrutiny by allowing for more open discussion and questioning of government actions
- Improve representation and inclusivity by increasing diversity among members and ensuring representation of marginalized groups

Election Commission

The Election Commission in Bangladesh must enhance its impartiality and credibility to ensure free and fair elections. To do so, the commission should:

- Enhance impartiality by reducing political influence in electoral decision-making
- Improve voter registration and polling processes through modernization and increased transparency
- Increase transparency in electoral decision-making by publishing detailed information on electoral processes and outcomes

Civil Service

The civil service in Bangladesh requires strengthening to ensure professionalism and accountability. To achieve this, the civil service should:

- Promote merit-based appointments by reducing political influence in hiring processes
- Enhance professionalism and training through capacity-building programs and performance evaluations
- Increase accountability and transparency by establishing clear performance metrics and ensuring access to information

The Anti-Corruption Commission in Bangladesh must enhance its independence and effectiveness to tackle corruption. To do so, the commission should:

- Increase independence from political influence by establishing a clear separation of powers
- Enhance investigative and prosecutorial capacity through training and resource allocation
- Improve coordination with other institutions by establishing clear lines of communication and cooperation

IV. Human Rights Concerns

Bangladesh has made significant strides in economic development and poverty reduction, but the country's human rights record remains a pressing concern. Despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments, human rights violations persist, undermining the well-being and dignity of citizens. The government's increasing authoritarianism, restrictions on civil liberties, and impunity for abuses have created a culture of fear and silence.

The human rights situation in Bangladesh is characterized by a range of concerns, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary detention. The government's handling of political dissent, freedom of expression, and assembly has been particularly troubling, with opposition activists, journalists, and civil society members facing harassment, intimidation, and violence. Furthermore, marginalized communities, including women, minorities, and indigenous peoples, continue to face discrimination and exclusion. This section examines the human rights concerns in Bangladesh, highlighting the need for urgent attention and action to address these issues and ensure the protection and promotion of human rights for all.

1. Overview of human rights issues, such as freedom of speech and press

Bangladesh faces significant human rights challenges, including:

- Restrictions on freedom of speech and press:*** Journalists and media outlets face harassment, intimidation, and censorship, limiting their ability to report critically on government actions.
- Political repression:*** Opposition activists and critics of the government are subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture.
- Enforced disappearances:*** Individuals, often political opponents or critics, are abducted and held in secret, with no accountability.
- Extrajudicial killings:*** Security forces engage in deadly shootouts, often claiming self-defence, but with allegations of staged encounters.
- Torture and ill-treatment:*** Detainees face physical and psychological abuse, with impunity for perpetrators.
- Freedom of assembly and association:*** Peaceful protests are met with force, and restrictions on NGOs and civil society organizations limit their ability to operate.

- vii. **Women's rights:** Gender-based violence, child marriage, and discrimination persist, with inadequate legal protections.
- viii. **Minority rights:** Indigenous communities and religious minorities face discrimination, land grabbing, and violence.
- ix. **Labor rights:** Workers, particularly in the garment sector, face exploitation, poor conditions, and limited protections.

These issues highlight the need for Bangladesh to address its human rights record, strengthen protections, and ensure accountability for abuses.

2. Discussion of the government's response and international concerns

The government of Bangladesh has faced criticism for its response to human rights concerns. Many argue that it has failed to investigate and prosecute abuses, restricted civil society and media freedom, used excessive force against protesters, and ignored recommendations from international human rights bodies. This lack of action has led to widespread impunity, perpetuating a culture of abuse and violence.

International concerns have been raised by various organizations and governments, including the United Nations human rights mechanisms, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the European Union, and the United States Department of State. These concerns have led to calls for increased scrutiny and monitoring, recommendations for legal and policy reforms, threats of sanctions and aid restrictions, and diplomatic pressure for improved human rights performance.

The government has responded to these concerns by denying allegations of human rights abuses and claiming that criticism is politically motivated. It has also highlighted its development achievements and economic growth, while promising reforms but with limited implementation. However, this response has failed to address the underlying issues, and the human rights situation remains a major concern.

The disconnect between the government's response and international concerns highlights the need for sustained pressure and engagement to address Bangladesh's human rights challenges. It is essential to continue monitoring the situation, advocating for reforms, and supporting civil society and human rights defenders in their efforts to promote and protect human rights in Bangladesh.

V. Economic Development and Corruption

Bangladesh has made significant strides in economic development, with steady GDP growth, poverty reduction, and improvements in human development indicators. However, this progress is threatened by pervasive corruption, which undermines the country's potential for sustainable and inclusive growth. Corruption in Bangladesh is deeply entrenched, affecting all aspects of life, from business and politics to healthcare and education. It distorts markets, discourages investment, and perpetuates inequality, making it a major obstacle to achieving the country's development goals. This section examines the complex relationship between economic development and corruption in Bangladesh, highlighting the need for effective anti-corruption measures to ensure that the benefits of growth are shared by all.

1. Analysis of Bangladesh's economic growth and challenges

Bangladesh's economic growth has been steady, with a GDP growth rate of around 7% in recent years. This growth has been driven by several factors, including:

- i. Remittances from overseas workers, which have increased significantly in recent years

- ii. Garment exports, which remain a key driver of the country's economy
- iii. Domestic consumption, which has been fuelled by a growing middle class
- iv. Investment in infrastructure, which has improved connectivity and facilitated trade

Despite this growth, Bangladesh faces significant economic challenges. Some of the key issues include:

- i. High levels of poverty and inequality, with many citizens still living below the poverty line
- ii. Limited economic diversification, with the country relying heavily on a few key industries
- iii. Dependence on a few key markets, making it vulnerable to external shocks
- iv. Infrastructure constraints, including inadequate transportation and energy systems
- v. Corruption and governance issues, which can discourage investment and hinder growth

To sustain economic growth and address these challenges, Bangladesh needs to take several steps. These include:

- i. Diversifying its economy, by developing new industries and sectors
- ii. Investing in human capital and skills development, to improve productivity and competitiveness
- iii. Improving infrastructure and connectivity, to facilitate trade and investment
- iv. Enhancing governance and reducing corruption, to create a more favourable business environment
- v. Promoting private sector development and investment, to drive growth and job creation

2. Discussion of corruption's impact on development and democracy

Corruption has a profound impact on development in Bangladesh, affecting various aspects of society. It undermines development by diverting resources away from essential public services and infrastructure, distorting markets and discouraging investment, perpetuating inequality and poverty, and hindering human development and access to education and healthcare. This has far-reaching consequences, including reduced economic growth, increased poverty, and decreased access to basic services.

Corruption also erodes democracy in Bangladesh, undermining trust in institutions and the rule of law. It manipulates elections and the political process, suppresses dissent and restricts freedom of speech, and concentrates power and wealth in the hands of a few individuals. This has led to a decline in democratic values and principles, making it challenging to hold those in power accountable.

Furthermore, corruption has other devastating effects on the country. It discourages foreign investment and aid, essential for development, and encourages brain drain and talent flight. Corruption also fosters a culture of impunity and lawlessness, threatening national security and stability. If left unchecked, corruption can have catastrophic consequences for Bangladesh's future.

To address these challenges, Bangladesh needs to take decisive action. This includes strengthening institutions and the rule of law, enhancing transparency and accountability, promoting citizen participation and engagement, implementing effective anti-corruption measures and laws, and fostering a culture of

integrity and good governance. By addressing corruption, Bangladesh can unlock its full potential for development and democratic growth, ensuring a brighter future for its citizens.

VI. External Influences and Regional Dynamics

Bangladesh's development and democracy are not only shaped by internal factors but also influenced by external forces and regional dynamics. The country's strategic location in South Asia, bordered by India and Myanmar, and its proximity to Southeast Asia, make it a crucial player in regional affairs. External influences, including geopolitical rivalries, economic interests, and cultural exchanges, have significant impacts on Bangladesh's domestic politics, economy, and society.

The regional dynamics of South Asia, particularly the complex relationships between Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, play a critical role in shaping the country's foreign policy and security concerns. Additionally, the growing presence of global powers, such as China and the United States, in the region, has introduced new dimensions to Bangladesh's external relations. This section examines the external influences and regional dynamics that shape Bangladesh's development and democracy, highlighting the opportunities and challenges that arise from its strategic location and regional interactions.

1. Examination of regional and global factors affecting Bangladesh's democracy

Bangladesh's democracy is influenced by various regional and global factors, which can be both beneficial and challenging. Some of these factors include:

Regional Factors:

- i. **India's influence:** As Bangladesh's largest neighbour, India plays a significant role in shaping the country's foreign policy and domestic politics.
- ii. **SAARC and BIMSTEC:** Regional organizations like SAARC and BIMSTEC provide platforms for Bangladesh to engage with neighbouring countries and address regional issues.
- iii. **China's growing presence:** China's increasing economic and strategic engagement in the region has implications for Bangladesh's relationships with other countries.

Global Factors:

- i. **Global democratic trends:** Bangladesh's democracy is influenced by global democratic trends, including the rise of populism and authoritarianism.
- ii. **International organizations:** Organizations like the United Nations, European Union, and international NGOs play a crucial role in promoting democracy and human rights in Bangladesh.
- iii. **Global economic factors:** Economic globalization and trade relationships with countries like the United States, European Union, and China impact Bangladesh's economy and democracy.

These regional and global factors can have both positive and negative impacts on Bangladesh's democracy, depending on how they are managed. Effective engagement with these factors can help consolidate democracy, while mismanagement can lead to challenges and setbacks.

2. Discussion of the role of neighbouring countries and international organizations

The role of neighbouring countries and international organizations plays a significant impact on Bangladesh's democracy and development. India, as the largest neighbour, has substantial influence on Bangladesh's politics, economy, and security. India's support can enhance Bangladesh's democracy, while tensions can hinder progress. China's growing economic and strategic presence in the region also has implications for Bangladesh's relationships with India and other countries.

The Rohingya crisis has strained Bangladesh-Myanmar relations, affecting regional stability and Bangladesh's democracy. The international community has played a crucial role in addressing this crisis, with organizations like the United Nations providing humanitarian assistance and promoting a resolution. The UN also plays a broader role in promoting democracy, human rights, and development in Bangladesh through various agencies and programs.

International organizations like the European Union and the Asian Development Bank provide significant economic and development assistance to Bangladesh. The EU is a major trade partner, and its support can enhance Bangladesh's economy and democracy. The ADB provides financial assistance and policy guidance, supporting Bangladesh's development and democracy. However, this involvement can also create dependencies and undermine sovereignty if not managed carefully.

International NGOs like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International promote human rights and democracy in Bangladesh. Their advocacy and reporting can help hold the government accountable and promote positive change. However, their involvement can also be perceived as external interference, and their recommendations may not always align with local contexts and priorities. Effective engagement and management of these relationships are crucial for Bangladesh to maximize benefits and minimize challenges.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, Bangladesh's democracy faces numerous challenges that threaten its stability and progress. The country's complex political landscape, weak institutions, and external influences all contribute to these challenges. Despite these obstacles, Bangladesh has made significant strides in economic development and human rights.

To address these challenges and strengthen democracy, it is essential to prioritize institutional reforms, promote transparency and accountability, and foster a culture of inclusivity and tolerance. The government, civil society, and international community must work together to ensure free and fair elections, protect human rights, and promote economic development that benefits all citizens.

Furthermore, addressing corruption, ensuring judicial independence, and promoting media freedom are critical steps towards consolidating democracy. The international community can support Bangladesh by providing technical assistance, promoting trade and investment, and advocating for human rights and democratic values.

Ultimately, strengthening democracy in Bangladesh requires a sustained effort from all stakeholders. By working together, we can build a more just, equitable, and prosperous future for the people of Bangladesh. The time to act is now – let us seize this opportunity to promote democratic values, address challenges, and ensure a brighter future for generations to come.

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