

## Civil and uncivil society in Bangladesh

As we move to a more technological and consumption oriented society, there are people who would like the intellectuals to keep their mouths shut or keep their laptops locked. The less they talk the more profit can be earned by the corporations. The less they deliberate, the more political advantages can be secured by the unscrupulous politicians. There are forces of uncivil society at work in Bangladesh. These are made up of people without scruple or ability to engage in a reasoned debate. They are protected by ill-begotten money. They are products of a corrupt culture.

### HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

THE recent debates over the political role of civil society and the flurry of writings on this subject are positive developments and signs of the vibrancy of the civil society in Bangladesh. What is civil society?

Civil Society is not just the sum-total of the NGOs. Nor is it a club of the elite. It is foremost an idea, indeed a great idea that keeps democracy working. It is a space -- non-coerced, of course as Michael Walzer reminds us -- where people discuss freely issues of interest to them with an eye to collective wellbeing. An associated -- but not coterminous -- concept is Public Sphere. Concepts such as these are better understood if they are contrasted with their opposites. For example, public sphere is contrasted with private sphere and civil society with the state.

Civil Society is best understood when it is contrasted with or differentiated from political society or religious society. The idea of civil society had its roots in the separation between the Church and the State. St. Augustine's differentiation between the "city of god" and the "city of man" in the 5th century was one of the earliest formulations. Although St. Augustine sought return of the "city of god," the notion of an autonomous secular domain incorporating both the state and the

civil society inadvertently arose.

In Europe, throughout the Middle Ages, civil society remained submerged under the dominance of the Church. It is around this time, Islamic civilization based in Andalusia saw a vibrant Public Sphere. Political theorists such as Rousseau in the eighteenth century wanted to wrench civil society out of the dominance of the Church to secure individual freedom. At that time civil society included the state under its fold.

The differentiation made between political society and civil society is more recent. In modern society, civil society came to be defined as an arena outside the state (or political society). Here civil society still remained quite inclusive with economy and family within its fold. That was the view of civil society in the nineteenth century held by Hegel and Marx.

Recent formulations make a further differentiation between civil society and economic society. Market is kept out of civil society analytically. Social scientists now generally concur that the threats to civil society may come from political society as much from the economic society. There is a real threat of civil society being gobbled up by the forces of market. It is important to keep the minimalist, albeit abstract, definition of civil society in mind; it is an uncoerced space for deliberations. And it is crucially important to

maintain the autonomy of that space.

This however does not mean that civil society is apolitical. Civil society has always had a political role in the broader sense of politics but not in the narrow sense of politics which is about how to grab political power. To deemphasize the potential political role of civil society in many illiberal democracies the choice phrase is civic society and not civil society. The difference between the two concepts is not mere semantic.

Both civil society and the arena of politics belong to the public sphere. A politician like a civil servant or an NGO activist is engaged in public service. Intellectuals are sometimes classified as either a public or private intellectual. The likes of Rehman Sobhan, or Professor Zafar Iqbal, a scientist and a talented author take a public stance on various issues, thus they qualify as public intellectuals. For example, Arundhati Roy is a fine public intellectual in addition to a celebrated writer.

One should not get the idea that to be a member of civil society one has to be a writer or public intellectual but the leadership has to come from people who have the ability, time, and interest in conducting such deliberations. It is often the public intellectuals who are at the helms of the civil society because of their ability to formulate ideas that seek to ensure public interest.

Thus civil society is a free space in theory. The actual utilization of this space is circumscribed by various limitations. Some of the discussions that whether civil society is a club of the elite miss the point completely which prompted this discussion. The main purpose of this preamble is to situate the ongoing debate on the role of civil society or "shushil sama" in the political process of Bangladesh in a theoretical frame.

In real time and real life, social evolution did not take place in a linear fashion with the separation of civil society from the other domains such neatly. Religion came back with vengeance as a political force which baffled social scientists who thought that with time religion would become a matter of the past. There is sacralization along side and opposed to secularization. Most social analysts think in terms of linearity, while society does not show much respect for continuity and linearity. So it would be useful to talk about uncivil society as we consider civil society. Civil society evolves in an ongoing battle with the forces opposed to it.

Uncivil society is a force -- outside of the authority of the state which threatens civil society. State, however, may be complicit with the uncivil society. The state apparatus of Bangladesh is at risk of being captured by the forces of uncivil society. That has led some alarmists

to use phrases like "failed state" to refer to Bangladesh. Many writers point to drug cartel and other such antisocial elements as uncivil society. A band of criminals are not just uncivil, they are anti-social. Civil society minimally requires an element of civility in its definition.

Uncivil society is that aspect of civil society which challenges the norms of civil society. In the place of "shushil" it tries to establish "ashil" if not "ashilil" samaj in which indecency, if not outright vulgarity, intemperance if not intolerance tend to dominate public discourse. Instead of decency and reasoned discussion, lies, fabrications, rejections of norms of fairness and the cynical (mis)use of religion tend to be the new norms which may either devalue, or worse, displace decent society.

The main purpose of the civil society or "shushil sama" is to fight for the rehabilitation of norms of decency and fairness. And it is towards that goal people who value these norms must come and take part in public deliberations. The role of reasoned discussion and debate in democracy cannot be overestimated. In that sense civil society becomes a prerequisite for democracy.

Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has been particularly innovative in bringing together different stakeholders in the policy making process, i.e., politicians, civil servants, academics and others who are interested in such deliberations on the same platform which is an unusual scene in Bangladesh. To characterize these talks as elitist is simply ignorance. In any society, the entire population cannot be expected to come out and join the town hall meeting to discuss issues of common interest. The question is whether the disenfranchised, the

peasants, the subalterns get a voice or not.

The separation of elite and masses is not always clear cut. On April 14, 2006 when Dr. Kamal Hossain went to Kansat for a fact-finding mission and to express solidarity with the struggling people, he was not just an Oxford-educated internationally reputed lawyer and a key figure in the national history of Bangladesh, he was one of the Bangladeshis who could reach out. There were many non-elite Bangladeshis who kept a safe distance from the "trouble" and concentrated on the celebration of *pohela baishak*. Or when Hameeda Hossain, an Oxford-educated historian of great distinction writes about the palpable condition of the safety of the garment workers, she becomes the voice of the voiceless. The charges of elitism come from people who have not done much thinking or reading about these issues and can be reminded what Mao Xedong (Cahirman Mao) once said -- I paraphrase -- one does not have to be a shop-keeper to be a petty-bourgeois intellectual.

Intellectuals committed to public cause or men and women with capacities for articulation of the voices of the weak will play a larger role in civil society and in public affairs. This does not mean that civil society has to have a single voice. There could be right, left, liberal or any other ideological positions as long as these views are deliberated in a reasoned, considered, tempered, and decent manner.

When Mr. Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, a noted journalist launches a critique of the initiatives of the Citizens' group that gathered the likes of Professor Yunus or Justice Habibur Rahman it needs a careful assessment. The position of Mr. Chowdhury in the history of

Bangladesh will remain immortalized by his memorable Ekushey song which will outlive any one of us. His criticism of Professor Rehman Sobhan, another key figure in our history seems fratricidal to me. Rehman Sobhan was one of the authors of the two-economy theory in the 1960s that shaped the six-points movement led by Bangabandhu which laid the foundation of our struggle for emancipation.

Mr. Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury invokes the phrase "chattering classes" to characterize the leading public intellectuals of Bangladesh. That is regrettable because this phrase was invoked by the conservative politicians in U.K. to undermine the legitimacy of the leading intellectuals. But what about chattering classes?

According to Joe Moran: "Chattering class -- a term that suggests a cadre of metropolitan, left liberal professionals with nothing better to do than twither on about the country's problems at posh dinner parties, detached from the realities of political power and the aspirations of ordinary people" (*New Statesman* October 24, 2005). They are, in Moran's words, "Urban intellectuals, good people who are well-informed, big-hearted but small in numbers."

Are people like Professor Yunus just urban intellectuals? Yes, there are chattering classes in Bangladesh who spend an inordinate amount of time chatting in the drawing rooms solving all the problems of the world in one session. Amartya Sen in his *The Argumentative Indian* provides a good example of the argumentative nature of not just Indians but Bengalis as well. He uses Raja Ram Mohan Roy's anecdote that the only tragedy of dying is that he won't be able to argue and debate anymore.

But those who participated in the deliberations at the Sheraton Hotel on March 20, 2006 are not just chatters; they have a proven record of public service. Mr. Chowdhury also points out Sheraton Hotel as if Sheraton Hotel is a villain. There are other critics who also accused the Citizens body of elitism. In my opinion this is a cheap shot. A person such as Professor Yunus or Mr. Abed or Ms. Khushi Kabir or Professor Zafar Iqbal can sit at Sheraton or Hotel Sonargaon or wherever, it is what they think and do that counts.

As we move to a more technological and consumption oriented society, there are people who would like the intellectuals to keep their mouths shut or keep their laptops locked. The less they talk the more profit can be earned by the corporations. The less they deliberate, the more political advantages can be secured by the unscrupulous politicians.

There are forces of uncivil society at work in Bangladesh. These are made up of people without scruple or ability to engage in a reasoned debate. They are protected by ill-begotten money. They are products of a corrupt culture. Some of them are ever ready to trade their intellectual integrity for material benefits thrown at them by their political overlords. Mr. Gaffar Chowdhury himself has pointed out in his various columns the rise of these unholy forces. And when he turns his intellectual force against the champions of civil society he forgets (temporarily, I hope) that there are many who would be glad to see Rehman Sobhan not talk and Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury not write. Should these forces be given a walk-over?

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## Constitutional dilemma in Thailand

I think a smooth transfer of power is an essential characteristic of a mature democracy. The thought of removing a corrupt political leader with the help of street demonstrations disturbs me because it may set dangerous precedents. In a democracy, where the constitutional mechanisms for checks and balances function properly, street demonstrations are unnecessary. However, if these mechanisms are hijacked by a corrupt prime minister to serve his own goals, the people may have no other choice but to resort to street demonstrations to remove him.

### CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM

LET me be frank about it. I have always had a soft spot for Thailand, the only country in that part of the world, which was able to resist the brutal onslaught of European colonialism in the nineteenth century. I like the gentle nature of its people and the inclusive character of its culture, which is a synergic mixture of Hindu traditions (the Ramayana is one of them), Buddhist spirituality, Confucian ethics and European mercantilism.

Actually, my fascination for Thailand started many years ago, when as a young man I saw Walter Lang's splendid 1956 movie *The King I*, in which Yul Brynner brilliantly played the part of Siam's farsighted king who was trying to cope

with the conflicts of Siamese and European cultures.

Since then, I have met many Thais in Europe, who confirmed my earlier impressions of Thais being an essentially friendly and peace-loving people. So a few weeks ago, after a long flight from Madrid, when I arrived in Bangkok to visit the country it came as a shock to me to find its bustling streets filled with thousands of noisy flag-waving demonstrators.

After I got over the initial shock, I realised that despite the presence of so many banner carrying protesters, there were not many policemen around and that there was hardly any violence. Upon enquiry, I was told that they were protesting against their government.

After weeks of ever-larger street protests in Bangkok and elsewhere

by hundreds of thousands of students, members of labour unions and the urban middle class against the democratically elected government of Thailand, Mr. Thaksin, the prime minister decided to call a snap election on April 2.

The opposition parties boycotted the election, alleging that there was not enough time to prepare them for it. In comparison with 19 million votes won in 2005, this time Mr. Thaksin won approximately 16 million out of 28 million votes cast. Mr. Thaksin, who had considered the election as a referendum on him had announced earlier that he would resign if he got less than 50% of the votes.

Having won approximately 57% votes, Mr. Thaksin felt that the electorate had renewed his mandate therefore, he should continue as the prime minister. The opposition prom-

ised more street demonstrations and strikes. Until the election, despite the huge rallies and virtual shutdown of government offices, there had been very little violence. However, the country had reached a political stalemate and everybody feared that if the stalemate were to continue, there would be large-scale violence.

The Thais are an essentially conservative people and King Bhumibol is the much-loved and revered monarch of Thailand. He takes his role as a constitutional monarch seriously. Although the court keeps a careful watch over everything that goes on in the country, the king maintains a rigorous distance from day-to-day political affairs.

Until now, only on very special occasions has he intervened in politics. However, his interventions

have always been decisive. On April 4, the king invited Mr. Thaksin to have "a special audience" with him. The deliberations of such meetings are secret. Nevertheless, the message was clear; the king did not want the political stalemate to continue.

After the meeting, Mr. Thaksin went on the television and announced with tears in his eyes that he would step aside. At the time of writing this letter, it is not clear as to what is going to happen now. Most probably, a caretaker government will run the country until new elections are held. This affair -- months of street demonstrations and then Mr. Thaksin's decision to step aside -- has brought to light a dilemma:

If street demonstrations are used to force a democratically elected prime minister out of office, will it not lead to a diminished democracy? On the other hand, if an elected prime minister manipulates the constitutional mechanisms to concentrate personal power and amass wealth by unlawful means, how can the people get rid of him peacefully?

A constitutional government should provide stability for a smooth transfer of power, be adaptable to

changes, must have checks and balances and be accountable for its decisions and actions. On the domestic front, during his five years in office, Mr. Thaksin was quite successful in maintaining peace and stability except in the south.

He pushed through a number of economic measures, which alleviated poverty in rural areas and at the same time helped the industrial sector to grow significantly. However, in order to project himself as a strong national leader, he tuned himself into a populist authoritarian politician. He violated the checks and balances provisions of the constitution by usurping power and intimidating the opposition, by employing his cronies in key government positions and using the state-owned media and the media companies he had personally acquired, as his personal propaganda machine.

In an open letter to King Bhumibol, Sondhi, the highly respected newspaper publisher summarised the situation: "The prime minister has absolute power. He can decide everything on his own. He does not listen to Thai people who own this country."

Mr. Thaksin has also seriously violated human rights in the south. His iron-fisted response to demands for autonomy in the three Muslim majority Malay provinces has resulted in the massacre of thousands of Muslims. This territory was annexed by Thailand in 1902. Thaksin's policy has upset the peaceful co-existence of the Buddhist and Muslim communities in the country and triggered angry reactions from across the Muslim world.

However, what really brought him down was corruption. According to a recent statement issued by the auditor general of Thailand, "making corruption legal" has been the Thaksin administration's main achievement. To avoid conflict of interest, the 1997 constitution specifically barred all political office holders from owning or operating businesses.

It is alleged that using insider knowledge and his political position, he has amassed an immense fortune. The recent 1.9 billion dollar tax-free Shin-Themasek transaction with the government of Singapore in the sensitive telecommunications sector was the last straw that broke the

camel's back. It outraged the public and triggered massive demonstrations against him in Bangkok and elsewhere.

I think a smooth transfer of power is an essential characteristic of a mature democracy. The thought of removing a corrupt political leader with the help of street demonstrations disturbs me because it may set dangerous precedents. In a democracy, where the constitutional mechanisms for checks and balances function properly, street demonstrations are unnecessary.

However, if these mechanisms are hijacked by a corrupt prime minister to serve his own goals, the people may have no other choice but to resort to street demonstrations to remove him. The Thai society is an extraordinarily resilient one. One hopes that the Thaksin affair will help reinforce its democratic institutions by building extra safeguards against abuse of power so that the constitutional rule can survive without the intervention of the so-called "people power."

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