



From 'socialism' to disaster capitalism

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We may pinpoint some of the steps/incidences under the reform/development processes that we witnessed in the last four decades as:

(1) Big public enterprises were dismantled; large mills were replaced by export processing zones, shopping malls and real estate; (latest events in this series are the closure of remaining jute mills and closing operations of six sugar mills). (2) Export oriented garments factories became the mainstay of manufacturing. (3) Permanent industrial jobs were replaced by a temporary, part-time outsourced insecure work system. (4) Migration from agriculture to non-agriculture, from rural areas and to semi-urban or urban areas, from country to overseas increased. Desperate attempts by many unemployed youth to find jobs overseas created human trafficking. Remittances sent by migrant workers appeared as the lifeline of the economy. (5) Energy resources and power were systematically privatised. Electricity became a costly commodity, and costs for the productive sector have increased. (6) Land grabbing, occupying public spaces by private business, and deforestation have created environmental disasters and uprooted many. (7) Privatisation of public goods/services and common property gained momentum. (8) A number of environmentally dangerous projects such as the Rampal-Matarbari-Bashkhali-Payra coal-fired power plants and the Rooppur nuclear power plant are being implemented without considering long run impacts for people and nature.

In this one-eyed development model, people's ownership over common properties is practically denied, lack of worker's rights is severe, environmental blindness and structure oriented approaches remain dominant in development projects, manufacturing myth to rationalise harmful foreign "aid"-ed and/or investment projects is part of development advertisements, institutions are made crippled to serve ruling groups, and lack of accountability and transparency become permanent features



ILLUSTRATION: JINNATUN JANNAT

of the system. That is why construction costs of roads, bridges and other projects in Bangladesh are the highest in the world. The whole model takes the shape of disaster capitalism.

During this period, the economy showed consistent growth in national income, significant rise in exports of garments and remittance income, expansion of microcredit and NGO network, and increasing urbanisation and rural-urban-overseas migration. It is evident that NGO credit operations helped non-farm activities to grow in the rural areas, like small trade, small money lending, small scale handicrafts and rickshaw-vans. But many studies revealed the limits of microfinance as a tool of poverty reduction. This has rather shown the face of "neoliberalism for the poor".

So, despite high growth, Bangladesh

remains a country featuring a significant level of poverty, rising inequality and vulnerability. With the primitive nature of capital accumulation and rise of the new super rich class, violence and grabbing of common properties have risen with GDP growth. Increase of the super rich in the country has occurred at one of the highest rates in the world. This is the obvious outcome of a disaster capitalist process.

Therefore, it is not surprising when we see growing resources but increasing deprivation, dazzling cities with increasing slums, construction booms with the worst level of pollution, high rise buildings with poor safety records, big projects to destroy ecological balances, resource plunder and its outflow with increasing inequality and vulnerability. Conditions of public services, i.e., public healthcare, public education, safe drinking water, public transport

and public security are getting poorer besides increasingly expensive projects of development. State responsibility for providing these services to citizens is not recognised in this model. This is more exposed in times of crisis. Absence of social security, full rationing of food and weakened public healthcare systems have left millions of people in new poverty during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This journey to go against constitutional commitments and the spirit of the Liberation War could not be possible only by state forces, since it needs social support and ideological hegemony. Behind this, the role of the intelligentsia and opinion makers have been very crucial. This section usually comes from the middle class. The expansion of the middle class has been an important phenomenon in the last few decades. Affluence among a section of this middle class has mostly been an outcome of privatisation of social services, foreign aided projects and expansion of the service sector, in addition to increased opportunities of corruption. Options before the middle class to keep its status, and to climb the ladder to graduate to a higher income group are linked with the dominant mode of accumulation. Beneficiaries of privatisation of education and healthcare belong to a section of teachers and physicians. Career plans of the youth rely mostly on the commercialised service sector or other corporate capital. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the middle class, in general, becomes friendlier to grabbers, corrupt persons and rent-seekers, and neoliberal functionings of the state.

The shift from the promise of a society free from exploitation, discrimination and autocracy, a system of freedom, equality and justice, to a system that can be called lumpen or disaster capitalism, along with repression and discrimination, contradicts not only the Constitution but betrays the sacrifices of millions of people. That was not the dream of the people who fought for freedom and independence in 1971.

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Democracy: The journey that has taken a wrong turn

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against their own party and the PM also holding the party chief position, the rise of constitutional authoritarianism was only a matter of time. The executive branch had amassed power and used the legislature as merely the rubber stamp. The temptation to rig the election to ensure a super majority lies here. For a viable and functioning democracy there are three kinds of accountability—vertical, horizontal, and societal. Vertical accountability is the election system, while horizontal accountability of the government comes from a network of relatively autonomous powers, which are often the constitutionally mandated organisations such as the anti-corruption bodies; societal accountability is to the citizens' associations. While elections were held regularly, none of the other accountability mechanisms were present.

The civil society organisations were either politicised or vilified as the enemy, thus gradually losing their ability to hold the political elites and the government institutions accountable. An effective regime transition process requires trust among the stakeholders—the citizens, the political parties, the electoral commission, and the civil service. But the fraudulent elections held until 1990 had created a deep distrust about the electoral commission and the incumbent government. The acrimony between political parties after 1990 accentuated the distrust.

The unique solution to this was the introduction of the Caretaker Government (CTG) system in 1996 and holding elections under its supervision. This also offered an acceptable mechanism of vertical accountability. But the annulment of the CTG system, in a single stroke, removed the two things—

the only system of accountability and a peaceful system of power transition. This was a serious blow to the fragile democracy and pushed governance in a complete reversal. The independence of judiciary is the *sine a qua non* for the rule of law, protecting the citizens from the excesses of the executives. Also, it would serve as a check on other co-equal branches of the state—legislature and the executive. Without these the democratisation process failed to achieve success, instead the country moved from electoral democracy to a hybrid regime, which belies the essence of the proclamation of independence.

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