

# Is Bangladesh a "Soft State"?

by M. Rashiduzzaman

*The best ways to be a strong state is to build national unity, bridge economic gap, acquire military deterrence capability and cultivate a partnership among the political leaders and groups.*

THREE controversial steps by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina — the CHT accord, an unmet water-treaty with India and the proposal for giving transshipment facilities to the latter have spurred the perception that Bangladesh surely behaved like a "soft state" in dealing with its big neighbour. But wait a minute! Of late, the Indian press has been spinning the same kind of misleading — is India a "soft state"? Only last year, following the military coup there, Pakistan was characterized as the "soft state" — some even called it a failed state. But he present anxiety of India acting like a weak state comes in the backdrop of the Kargil episode, the deteriorating Kashmir situation and more importantly the hijacking of an Air India plane that ended in New Delhi's dramatic capitulation to the terrorists. All the major South Asian states, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka could fit into the paradigm of soft states proportionate to their respective level of institutional slump, governance crises, escalating domestic conflicts, and their relative unimportance in the global strategic arena.

Which one is softer than the other? And in what respect? Generally speaking, the national states, in recent decades, have been weaker than ever before, and it's not a wringing rhetoric. Indeed, the old concept of omnipotent sovereignty is dwindling, and indeed, the ecology of the statehood itself has been shifting — sovereignty

is no longer the Holy Grail, and the state-power is migrating to a variety of non-state institutions.

In the parlance of international politics, power should match power — a state is soft when it cannot effectively defend itself against an invading country or fail to resist diplomatic or economic pressure mounted by an external power. A successful state should also be able to deal with the centrifugal tendencies within its border. There is a kaleidoscope of views about the weakness of the state apparatus in Bangladesh, which could stretch itself from the domestic to the international arena. Whether we like it or not, the future of the CHT may become the litmus test for the Bangladeshi state-apparatus including the military resources. For those who opposed the CHT deal, Dhaka's hasty acceptance of a New Delhi-brokered agreement was more in India's strategic interest, which demonstrated the Bangladeshi weakness before the rebels and India's pressure while the military successfully contained the separatist insurgency.

There are other vital security challenges to be taken into consideration. The military in Bangladesh has withdrawn from politics, but the armed forces' national security role remains paramount. Without a viable military deterrence, a state hardly inspires political prestige in the global or regional arena — it becomes a pliable "lamb state". I am not sug-

gesting that India is planning an impending attack on Bangladesh, but any future unravelling in the neighbouring Indian (northeastern) states could be a calamitous security threat to Bangladesh, no matter how much of friendship New Delhi might cherish towards the political leadership in Dhaka and the vice versa. Already there are Indian allegations that the separatists from the northeastern states had their sanctuaries inside Bangladesh although the authorities in Dhaka have denied such charges. It is dangerously simplistic to count on the goodness from across the border, and ignore the national strategic capacity. Both theoretically and practically, the military is the ultimate weapon of the state power. Even with a political settlement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) being implemented, the porousness of the peace accord periodically reveals itself, but the worst may not have unraveled itself yet.

I cannot predict how will the strategic calculations between Bangladesh and India will exactly work — I don't know who can, but by its size, capability and weapon acquisitions, the Indian military is a formidable machine that will grow phenomenally in the next few years to come. Closely related to this is India's mind-boggling nuclear arsenal — India could eas-

ily bully the smaller non-nuclear countries in the region, and there are lessons to be drawn from the history of asymmetrical equation between the atomic weapon and non-atomic weapon states. Dimly aware of its importance, it is frequently argued that Bangladesh, a very poor country, could not afford a substantial military force. More than once, the top leaders were unable to confirm, in public, if Bangladesh had any long term security planning. Even a perceptively strong state cannot expect to solve all international disputes (and internal rebellion) through peaceful means, and when the chips are down the military power becomes the last resort.

As of now, there is no solid international guarantee for the so-called soft states, and the Kuwait example of being saved from a brutal aggression is a rare phenomenon unless the superpowers are involved. An empowered United Nations, the global guardian angel for the smaller nations, is not anywhere near although some form of global governance through a central planetary authority in the future could not be dismissed out of hand. But let us think of the reality now. Thanks to the unstoppable forces of globalization spreading its tentacles all over the

world, the sovereignty of the small states will, in the years to come, continue to be in a melting pot, and the traditional political demarcations will be under a threat, some subtle, some abrasive. The future political posture in Bangladesh can only ignore that reality to its peril.

The state-based governance arrangement in Bangladesh like most other nations, is being eroded by global political economy, information technology, and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), domestic and international. The Bangladesh government's agenda is no longer an exclusive expression of the groups and leaders in power — the transnational associations, and the non-state actors frequently claim rights over the head of the traditional governance structure. From time to time, Bangladesh has come in direct confrontation with what has been taken as the donor countries' and funding agencies' intervention in domestic politics — interestingly, both the ruling party and opposition groups have grumbled against it over a period of time. In such disputes between the NGOs and the government, it is the Bangladeshi authorities that frequently yield to the non-state institutions, and it is usually a quiet retreat for a poor nation with few levers.

But a state is also weakened

numerous people with motivated allegations, nor can you achieve national strength by purveying a notoriously one-sided history.

How do you transform a weak state into a strong one? No single recipe of course! The weak vs. strong differentiation of states is not meant to be a frozen caste system among the nation states — a weak state could conceivably become strong, and the strong state may also become spongy. You could find weak states among the practicing democracies, but the non-democracies are not the best specimen of strong states either — indeed, they proved to be potentially unstable. Both Bangladesh and Pakistan have made sudden and sharp turns and twists between democracy and military regimes, which made the global community wonder if the wheel is about to be turned. In case of Pakistan, in not so distant past, democratic hopes were raised by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's assertiveness as an elected leader, but the blazing expectations were doused again when General Pervez Musharraf fired the elected government and established a military-led non-elected regime. Whatever the military rulers may say or do in order to legitimize their take over, the action has only generated more questions about Pakistan's future. For more than one reason, it seems that the military has become the ultimate guardian of the state of Pakistan. That may be acceptable to many Pakistanis, but eventually, the mil-

itary-led state is not a strong state. Bangladesh had its own share of military regimes, but that did not necessarily make the state a strong one. Nor does a state become strong when its charismatic leader's towering height dwarfs all others; such hypnotic leadership spell is all but transitory even though one spell may last longer than the other, as we have seen in several countries.

Bangladesh has successfully reinstated the Westminster form of democracy, and there are even two strong parties — one balancing the other.

Those are good indicators of a working statehood — yet the leaders have been unable to take advantage of a mutually respectful two-party system. Much to our dismay, the Bangladeshi national parliament is on the brink of an impasse; it's the victim of the tumult and bitter standoff between the ruling party and the opposition. The politicization of the civil bureaucracy has a long history in Bangladesh, but that process has recently reached the dizzying depth. As a result, the good governance has taken a back seat. For such a degradation of institutional environment, the political leaders have to shoulder the ultimate responsibility. The best ways to be a strong state is to build national unity, bridge economic gap, acquire military deterrence capability and cultivate a partnership among the political leaders and groups.

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## DEMOCRACY, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE POOR

# Mass Participation in Poverty Alleviation Should be Ensured

by Md Amjad Hossain and Sohel Ibne Ali

*Participation and empowerment of people of all classes is essential for development and democratization. However, the poor women have to be given priority privilege because they are the most disadvantaged group. They have to be placed in the power structure; and their access to resources has to be ensured. Simultaneously, united initiative has to be taken and this process has to be started at the lowest tier of the local government.*

IN the present day world, democracy is not merely a political system. It is a social system as well and an ideology of life. The principles of democracy are equality, freedom and accountability. The famous words of Abraham Lincoln "Government of the people, by the people, for the people" gives the essence of democracy. As citizens of Bangladesh, we think that welfare of the masses of this country is not possible unless effective democratic process has been put into place. Bangladesh is fighting against poverty. The Government, semi-government, non-government institutions, and the progressive political organizations are working to conquer the widespread poverty. Yet, we have failed repeatedly to fulfil the expectations of the people. Nonetheless, despite many failures, we have some success also.

Barring only a few measures protecting the interests of mainly a few privileged groups of people, no noticeable significant steps have been taken for the poor majority. The absence of meaningful practice of democracy is a hindrance and threat to the development initiatives of government and NGOs. We have not overcome this even after passing so many years after the liberation, because a small number of people control the democratic and other institutions of the power structure for their own interests by means of controlling most of the resources. Members of civil society have no participation in the institutions. Accountable governance has not evolved; institutionalization of democracy and the development process have been hindered. The evil culture of black money and musclemen has tainted democracy.

So effective democratic institutions have not evolved in the country. The majority of the people are deprived of envisaged democratic benefits. The history before the liberation war was marked by discrimination against the Bengalees, oppression, loot and killings. The martial rule of Yahya and Ayub Khan and the discriminatory rule of Mohammed Ali Jinnah ignored the human rights of the citizens. Their authoritarian rules were obstacles to the evolution of democratic institutions in this land. Before that, the 200-year colonial rule made this nation crippled and ignorant. On the other hand, during the 28 years after the independence, we have seen single party rule and multi-party rule apart from military rule, but have never really seen democracy practised in the true sense of the term.

The local government at the bottom has always been controlled by the central government and the local elites to further their own interests when these institutions could actually play a very significant role in development and poverty alleviation. These institutions have to acquire democratic, accountable and transparent characters and be given enough resources and power for accelerating development. Due to administrative mismanagement, the poor but dedicated people, even after being elected, cannot work independently. They are loosing

their self-esteem and getting frustrated. The electorates are loosing confidence in them. Due to these drawbacks, even some good initiatives are not yielding good results. For example, creation of the provision of women councillors in the Union Council to be elected through direct vote is certainly one of the most important successes of the present government, but no instant benefit is coming out of this. This is because there is no specific policy guidelines for the women members. Therefore, the women members, although elected through direct vote, are still inactive.

By democracy, we generally mean freedom of speech, religion, opinion and association, the assertion of the rule of law, rule of majority, accompanied by respect for the rights of minorities. But it must also be borne in mind that democracy and development should go hand in hand. For that to happen, we need mass awareness and participation. In democracy there is no alternative to the participation of civil society in decision making, planning and implementation. Although there is a little representation of groups of people in our present structure of democracy, there is virtually no representation of the poor who are the main productive force. The poor are 50 per cent of the population and they are deprived of education, health and resources. So, for development to work it should be centered around the poor through their large scale participation.

The majority of the poor population is attached to agriculture and live in rural areas. The reason behind their poverty is illiteracy, lack of land and/or capital. If a poor person is to be educated and empowered, her/his rights to resources have to be established. Let us see now where the resources and power lie and how the poor can acquire those.

Resources can be categorised in the following four kinds:

- 1) Human Resource: The aggregation of the skill and potentialities of human beings. Human beings can be stimulated to be optimistic and visionary through education and imparting analytical knowledge.

- 2) Natural Resources: Means the land, forest, minerals, water etc, that are available in nature.
- 3) Power Structure: The resources are employed and opportunities regulated by the power structure of Bangladesh, therefore, the opportunity of using power may be considered a sort of resource.

- 4) Organizational Resource: For overall development of the country, pressure groups are needed. Different organizations such as community-based social and cultural bodies can make a strong pressure group to ensure development activities as well as government's administrative activities.

The government has its programme, structure and method for practising democracy. It can attract people through the media to participate in the operation. It is the responsibility of the government to facilitate the access of the poor to the resources of the country. In other words, the passive citizens of the country have to be turned into active citizens. However,



Poor women participating in a rural NGO meet: Motivating the masses.

the government apparatus has not yet been successful in restoring the interests of the poor. Consequently, the poor, the majority of the population, continue to remain passive.

The aim of development and democracy is to free people from the clutches of poverty. But ironically, government and non-government institutions are continuously making the people more burdened in different ways. We know, s/he who has power or resources exerts considerable influence in policy making. Therefore, the third world countries have to draw and implement their development plans according to the prescription of major donor agencies and even multinational.

A child is born in this land with a huge burden of debt on his/her head. On the other hand, most of the NGOs are providing micro credit to the poor, capitalizing on their poverty and in the name of development. They are criticized for acting like the zamindars, moneylenders and dadan traders of the mediaeval age. So, we should raise the slogan today, "Not only Credit but also Capital". Therefore, it has to be ensured that people have to be free and conscious, and have all the resources for their meaningful participation in the development process and the power structure.

Half of the country's poor population are women, who have fallen even further behind in society. They are exploited not only because they are poor, but also because they are the weaker sex. Many of the programmes for women development undertaken by women rights groups are not well-planned. However, in spite of all this, women must come forward. In this regard, the local government election system initiated by the present government is encouraging, although this has not yielded any result because of absence of a

proper policy guideline. The demand for creating 64 woman seats in the National Parliament, to be filled by elected women from every district by direct vote was not accepted. Special programmes, policies, and laws giving preference to women are necessary until women participation becomes equal to men in education, leadership, and decision making. Thus a democratic society with equality of sexes can be established.

Now, let us see the relations of the poor population with power structure and how they can participate therein. We know NGOs work with the poor people and generally the targets of NGO activities are groups, each consisting of a few families. However, the NGO activities do not cover all the people. The government operates its development programmes through the national and local government bodies. The area of activities of local government bodies cover the entire country and they can work closely with the people. However, they are not that active. These institutions could be more effective by ensuring participation of the masses. The government and union parishad are empowered for ensuring the participation of the people at the local government level. The government has decided to establish a four-tier local government with the aim of development and effective practice of democracy.

The proposed tiers are District, Thana, Union and Village Councils. Except the Union Council, the others have not yet been implemented. These tiers have much resources, power and responsibility for contributing to development and democratization. They can use the resources and take decisions. However, two factions work in these institutions — the government officials and the elected representatives. For example, TNO and other govern-

ment officials' work in the Thana on one side, the elected chairman with other members work on the other side. Same as the Thana Council, Union Chairman is the elected representative in the Union Council while the Secretary, Block Supervisor, Tahshilder are the government officials. There is a broad scope of participation of local people in these institutions.

### Structure of the Local Government

The union parishad has its infrastructure all over Bangladesh. Therefore, it is necessary to give it enough power for the development and democratization of the country. When the union parishad will have the efficiency to take some important responsibility for development, the responsibility of the NGOs and the central government will decrease. However, the precondition of development must be to empower the poor people so that they can understand a matter clearly, take decision on that matter and implement the decision. When a community can take all the responsibilities of development on itself, development will take place. In this view, if the village and union parishad are empowered for planning for the development, collecting and utilizing their own resources with the participation of the poor and the women, the responsibility of the GO-NGO development sectors will automatically reduce, and the whole nation will walk along the path of democracy and development. The government will thus be less burdened as people will mostly shoulder the responsibility.

To correct the present imbalance in the society, programmes have to be taken giving priority to disadvantaged groups. Since the poor are the majority and disadvantaged, they have to be the main target group. On the other hand,

women have to be placed at the top of the priority list since they constitute half of the poor population and are subjected to dual plus exploitation. All steps have to be taken to organize, motivate, and develop skill of the poor people for their emancipation. Similarly, steps have to be taken as well to make the elected representatives competent for carrying out their responsibilities. There are many positive forces in the society who want changes. They are the professional and civil society groups. These groups have to be involved in the process. As a whole, a truly democratic local government can be established only through the participation of the poor, elected representatives and the civil society. For this purpose, we may follow some strategies as described below:

1. Unity/Organisation: It is not possible to implement all the plans at a time. Therefore, firstly we have to select a union of a specific thana of a specific district. Then we have to collect and store all sorts of information pertaining to that union. Next, the selected poor groups have to be united under locally-based small organizations or cooperatives. Village or ward-based organizations may be formed with the representation of the small cooperatives. Then a broader union federation may be formed with the representation of the village/ward based organizations. These organizations may hold meeting, rally, or mass gathering on different issues.

2. Motivation: After building organization of the poor people, motivational and human development programmes have to be undertaken to increase or awaken the intellect, willpower, analytical power, and confidence among them. Not only the poor women and men, people from all levels of the society can participate in such programmes. Such a pro-

gramme may include training, workshop, seminar, meeting, publication, campaign, voter education, dialogue, debate, video show, popular theatre, source of popular songs etc.

3. Lobbying and Advocacy: To promote the interest of the masses, rapport should be maintained with the people concerned on different issues. Advocacy initiatives have to be taken to realize the demands of the masses through unity and motivational programmes, to bring changes in law and to ensure a favourable environment for implementing all the plans.

4. Legal Aid: Legal aid programme is necessary for establishing the rule of law by ensuring access of the poor to legal aid clinics. An issue is a must for uniting a group of people of common interest. Such issues for the poor people may be khas land, justice, wages, women rights, prevention of women oppression, utilization of water resources, toll, tax, election, access to government facilities, child labour, mal-administration, social afforestation, terrorism, anti-corruption, road repairing, correction of records, fundamentalism, fishing in the government marshland, increasing women participation in all sectors including politics etc. United movement may be organized on the issues of honorarium of the elected representatives, planning, accumulation and utilization of resources and the issues of the women members.

It may be said that, no other institutions can play the role that the local government institution can in the process of development and democratization. In addition, this is the perfect time for using the opportunity of ensuring participation of the poor in the local government structure.

### Role of an NGO in Democratization

The issue of democracy-education and participation in local government may be new to a few like, say Samata. Samata a grassroots NGO as such realized the necessity of this while working for the rights of the poor to resources. The resources including khas land and other powers vested upon the local government have never come to the benefit of the masses, because there was no mass participation and accountability there, especially there was no women participation at all. In this context, Samata has been working for promoting the issues of the land-less majority since the mid-eighties towards strengthening democratic values. It has worked for the participation of the poor and the other members of the civil society in the local and national elections.

For democratization, it has implemented specific programmes among the elected representatives of the union parishad for capacity building. It brought people together under organizations and spearheaded programmes for the realization of their rights to resources and for their empowerment. It worked for the poor to make them active citizens of the country. It has undertaken further programmes to strengthen

and accelerate the endeavour with the assistance of the Asia Foundation and International Voluntary Services since 1997. And it has specific aim and objectives for this programme, such as —

To build capacity of the Union and Village Parishad; To stimulate the target people to play active role and to be vocal;

To increase participation as voter and competitor in the local, village and union parishad elections;

To assist the village and union parishad to make it pro-people, transparent and accountable institution;

To increase the participation of the target people in the power structure;

To turn the people into active citizens from passive subjects of the state;

To encourage women leadership;

To promote democratic values in every sector.

In line with the objectives, Samata organizes meetings, workshops, training programmes, seminars, public gatherings, popular theatre shows, popular song programmes, rallies, video shows, voter education, lobbying, ad-vocacy, legal aid etc. The target people of these programmes are group members, elected representatives (especially UP members), political workers, journalists, NGO workers, teachers, village leaders, Imams, voters and so on.

Some of the significant achievements of Samata through these programmes may be mentioned here. In the last UP elections, 53 of its group members competed and 43 were elected. Among the candidates, 21 were women and 32 men. Among the winners, 15 were women and 28 men. The bargaining capacity of the people has increased through these programmes. Democratic values have been strengthened among the group members and the civil society. The willingness of women to compete in the elections has increased. Further, forums of the elected women members have been formed in four thanas. The elected women members do advocacy and lobbying at the local and the administrative level. District level women forum of the elected members has been formed. The forums are working for running the Union Council more effectively and for the realization of the rights of the elected women members and women as a whole.

Participation and empowerment of people of all classes is essential for development and democratization. However, the poor women have to be given priority privilege because they are the most disadvantaged group. They have to be placed in the power structure; and their access to resources has to be ensured. Simultaneously, united initiative has to be taken and this process has to be started at the lowest tier of the local government. This calls for the united movement of the government, NGOs, intellectuals, professional and other groups of civil society, and other organizations including the poor.

The writers are Central Coordinator and Coordinator, respectively, of Samata.

**TOM & JERRY**

CHEESE EATING SCIENCE FICTION MOUSE CATCHING HUMOR

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**James Bond**

BY IAN FLEMING DRAWING BY HORAK

AT A SMALL 'KAFKINON' IN THE MORNING AFTER THE SHOOT-OUT...

YOU'RE THE ONLY SURVIVOR OF GORDIENKO'S GROUP. TELL ME THE NAME OF THE TRAITOR WHO IS HUNTING YOU NEXT! ARE YOU READY TO THROW IN WITH MY SIDE?

AGREED - IT'S YOUR MAJOR WANTED! BUT I MUST TRY TO LEAVE MOSCOW. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

PHONE THEIR EMBASSY. THEY MAY CONNECT WITH THE TRAITOR HIMSELF - BUT YOU'LL HAVE TO TAKE THE CHANCE

FIRST, BOND CALLS THE ATHENS STATION OF THE SECRET SERVICE...

WHAT? ARE YOU QUITE SURE?

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By Hanna-Barbera