

Civil society: Concept and role

Lathi-Bashi Samity -- a citizens' initiative with a difference

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It is now generally agreed that we do not have a vibrant civil society movement in Bangladesh. In fact, its absence is felt every day in our national life. Many of our challenging national issues impacting the lives of the common people are not adequately addressed and effectively remedied because of such an absence. What is even more disappointing is that the concept of civil society itself is not well understood in our country. Hence, the term is often misused. Many people liberally use -- or abuse -- this term without fully realising its meaning and significance.

The concept of civil society could perhaps be best understood from what it does or should do. Scholars in general see two important roles for civil society. First, to keep the state civil and non-intrusive. In our modern social arrangements, only the state enjoys coercive powers and can legally exercise physical force over its citizens. Using this authority, a state can and often does usurp people's liberty. Scholars like Max Weber, Montesquieu, and James Madison warned us of such possibilities. Consequently, the principle of separation of powers was adopted to prevent the concentration of governmental authority. Under this arrangement, state powers are separated and assigned to three autonomous but interdependent branches, namely the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. This diffusion of state powers creates a system of checks and balances, which is intended to keep the government from becoming tyrannical.

In spite of these precautions, state powers may still be abused and misused for the benefits of individuals or the vested interest groups. Coterie enjoying the patronage of the people in power can also indulge in misdeeds. Examples of such abuses and misdeeds abound in history. The civil society as a distinct social force, composed of conscious and audacious citizens, has historically evolved to prevent such misdeeds by the state or state supported groups. Driven by own conscience and the desire to make a difference, members of the civil society boldly stand for the truth and the justice without fear of recrimination or victimisation.

In an authoritarian system or in a dictatorial democracy, the importance of civil society for its countervailing role can hardly be overemphasised. Its role can be that of the fourth branch of the state -- along with the executive, the legislature and the judiciary -- for holding the state to account. Civil society as an organised social force, with media included in it, can effectively play this role, enhancing the quality of governance by ensuring that the state and public/private institutions perform their responsibilities.

The role of civil society is not just to be at loggerhead with the state. Another important role for it is to promote and organise voluntary citizen action. The state alone cannot meet all the challenges people face, even if it is fully committed to their welfare. Organised citizen's groups can

solve many problems locally, using local leadership, local initiatives and local resources. Civil society groups can be the catalysts, bringing people together at the local level to make it happen. In this role, members of civil society can work shoulder to shoulder with the state.

When people are organised, something magical happens -- a form of capital is created which is distinct from financial capital. This unique form of capital is called social capital. The source of social capital is interconnectedness and unity among people and their working together for a worthy common goal. History shows that societies, which enjoy more social harmony and generate more collective action, are relatively more well off. In

also change. Thus, most donor-funded projects do not endure. However, the most damaging aspect of this donor-dictated system is that many of our NGOs have essentially surrendered to the wishes and dictates of the donors, giving up their sense of dignity.

Another reason for the failure of our NGOs as civil society institutions is that many of them, especially the big ones, have become corporate houses. This naturally makes them more concerned about their own business benefits rather than public interest. Consequently, NGOs often are unable to take bold and principled stands in the greater interests of the public at large. Even though they offer various services and even dispense charity to help the poor, they seldom fight for the legiti-

society organisations in our country, the Lathi-Bashi Samity of Natore has been an inspiring exception. It was organised in the backdrop of the state's failure to provide physical security to the people of Natore, especially to its business community. It was a voluntary initiative of the people. The lifeblood of this initiative was the unity of the sufferers against evil elements, not the money. It was not a project-based, money centered NGO initiative -- rather a truly civil society movement to combat social ills.

In October 2002, I had the privilege of participating in the third anniversary celebration of the Lathi-Bashi Samity along with Justice Habibur Rahman, Professor Muzafer Ahmed, Professor

redress the challenge of toll collection, it also began to take initiatives to address other socio-economic problems like the subjugation of women and income generation. It goes without saying that the more such citizen initiatives are fomented around the country, the faster we will be able to redress many of our socio-economic problems and move forward as a nation. Nevertheless, the activities of the Lathi-Bashi Samity were abruptly stopped by the government a few weeks ago.

The Lathi-Bashi Samity is a legally registered organisation under the Directorate of Social Services. There are clear, mandatory procedures laid out by the registration authority for stopping the activities of registered organisations. However, according to newspaper reports, the activities of the Lathi-Bashi Samity were halted with administrative edicts, the legality and wisdom of which have already been questioned by many.

A mistake was made in stopping the activities of the Lathi-Bashi Samity and disbanding its central committee. Fortunately, efforts are now afoot to redress this mistake and reorganise it. We sincerely hope that another mistake will not be made in the process of reorganisation. According to the established rules, the authority to elect the executive committee of Lathi-Bashi Samity belongs to its general members. Any effort to dictate this election from the outside will not only be against the rules, but may also destroy the path breaking work the organisation has already initiated. Let the relevant authorities allow the general members of the Lathi-Bashi Samity to elect its own leaders and not interfere in the process.

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We know that most of the challenges people face are local and they must also be solved locally. The people facing them must be the key to their solutions. The Lathi-Bashi Samity not only organised and united the people in a lawful and non-violent manner to redress the challenge of toll collection, it also began to take initiatives to address other socio-economic problems like the subjugation of women and income generation.

countries like ours, where there is a great dearth of material resources, social capital can be an important substitute for financial capital. Civil society institutions can help create such social capital by catalysing citizen actions.

There are many reasons for the absence of a strong civil society movement in Bangladesh, one of which is our decadent political behaviour. An important cause for the decadence in our political process is a naked system of patronage. In our country, governmental facilities and favours are generally dispensed not based on a set of honest and objective criteria, but blindly to political henchmen without regard to fairness and justice. Such a spoil system, which is the worst form of corruption, creates an incentive for people, even for otherwise good people, to give up their neutrality and succumb to partisan positions. Consequently, many thoughtful individuals who should have remained non-partisan and, as members of civil society, speak up and speak out against injustices and misdeeds of the state, either become party to those deeds or remain silent about them. This state of affairs makes many people derisively refer to our so-called civil society as "evil society."

Voluntary organisations or NGOs are generally considered to be most important civil society institutions. But unfortunately in our country they have in general failed to play this role. One important reason for this failure is that most of our NGOs have over the years become contractors, implementing projects either for the government or for external donors. As implementing entities, they do not normally enjoy the freedom to assert their own priorities. Rather they have to play the games according to the rules set by the donors and implement many frivolous projects representing fads or pet ideas of the aid bureaucracy. Given this situation, with the drying up of donor money reflecting changes in their priorities, the priorities of the NGOs

mate rights of the people or mobilise disadvantaged groups to resist the misdeeds of the authorities or of the vested interest groups. The service delivery approach the NGOs use, it is often argued, makes poverty more tolerable. It is no wonder then that we have been able to only alleviate the poverty of some people, but not eradicate it from our land in spite of much efforts and spending of huge sums of money over the years.

Some of our NGOs have also become partisans. They overtly or covertly promote and protect the interest of specific political groups. As a result, they have lost their neutrality and are unable to play an effective watchdog role to protect the interests of the public.

While there is a great dearth of civil

Abdullah Abu Sayeed, The Daily Prothom Alo's editor Motiur Rahman and the film director Tarek Masud. During that visit I saw how this organisation not only asserted a united front against the daunting challenges of hooliganism, it also charted a new path for our socio-economic uplift. This new path involved awakening and mobilising people to create a social movement rather than implementing projects using large sums of donor funds. Social capital has been the basis of this initiative.

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Democracy cannot function when violence rules

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RECENT failure of a democratically elected government in Haiti has brought into focus that democracy cannot function when political leaders use strong-arm tactics to subdue any political opposition. Democratically elected President Aristide was returned to power by the Americans after he was overthrown by the military. But instead of running the country as a democrat, Mr. Aristide turned into an autocrat and terrorised his opposition through his loyalists. Now he has been overthrown again and his time is over.

Today we are seeing the proliferation of what Dr. Fareed Zakaria, editor of Newsweek International, says "illiberal democracy," where nominally elected leaders rule like neo-fascists.

Zakaria writes in Foreign Affairs magazine a few years ago: "Naturally there is a spectrum of liberal democracy, ranging from modest offenders like Argentina to near-tyrannies like Kazakhstan and Belarus, with countries like Romania and Bangladesh in between." Such illiberal democracies ultimately fail the test of democracy. Elections are meaningless if they lead to authoritarian regimes which do not allow political opposition and use violence and intimidation as instruments of government. As Dr. Zakaria correctly pointed out: "Constitutional liberalism, on the other hand, is not about the procedures of election of government, but rather government's goals. It refers to the tradition, deep in Western history, that seeks to protect an individual autonomy and dignity against coercion, whatever the source -- state, church, or society."

Seen in this light, recent attacks on Dr. Kamal Hossain, a prominent opposition leader and Dr. Humayun Azad, a prominent scholar are an assault on the very institution of democracy. These

attacks threaten democratic institutions and may lead to the collapse of the entire society as we have seen in Haiti. When a so-called elected leader like Aristide started to behave like an autocrat, he actually undermined his own future. He has now left the country in a political vacuum and only outside intervention can stem the total collapse. The tendency of a democratically elected government to believe that it has absolute authority can result in the concentration of power, often by extra-constitutional means and with grim results.

Over the last decade, elected governments claiming to represent the people have steadily encroached on the powers and rights of other elements in the society. When extra-constitutional violence is used to silence the opposition leaders and free thinkers, it can ultimately lead to collapse of the authority itself. When Robespierre, a leader of the French Revolution, used terror to destroy his critics, he became its ultimate victim. One of the fundamental basis of democratic rule is non-violent transfer of power. Democrats are allowed to use minimal violence only to counter violent attacks. But they must remember that non-violent opposition is fundamental to any democratic governance. It is the constitutional opposition that keeps the government from becoming a tyranny.

Bangladesh must eschew such undemocratic means and bring the culprits to justice. If the elected leaders fail to behave like democrats, the judges should step in and ensure that democratic norms are respected. Democracy without constitutional liberalism is not only inadequate, but dangerous, bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the abuse of power and ethnic and religious conflicts.

Energising the engine of growth

NUSRAT SHARMIN HUQ

ENERGY is fundamental to the quality of our life. It is also the engine of growth in the world economy. Hence, having considerable oil and gas resources has permeating and extensive effect on country's economic development. It fosters positive economic growth, provides greater employment opportunities and overall improves standard of living.

Bangladesh ranks as one of the world's most significant, under evaluated hydrocarbon provinces with 64 exploration wells. The country comprises one of the largest fluviodeltaic-slope fan complexes in the world -- the Bengal Fan. The western Bangladesh and the offshore areas are fairly unexplored. But considering the 22 gas discoveries and one oil discovery, Bangladesh has a very high historical exploration success rate of about 35 percent, very strongly world standards.

Petroleum system

In Bangladesh, the western platform shelf (the Bogra shelf) and the eastern Bengal foredeep constitute the two major tectonic and sedimentological regimes of the Bengal basin. The Bengal basin can be divided into three main petroleum systems. Among which the Bogra system, considered to be Bangladesh's highest potential petroleum system in western part of the country, has not been explored effectively. The other two are the Surma and Hatia systems that contain all discovered and producing hydrocarbon deposits in Bangladesh and the Bogra system can be further subdivided into three systems, bringing the country wide total to five.

Resource base

Bangladesh resource base is divided into three main categories: Existing field discoveries, field growth, and new field discoveries. Field discoveries consist of prior production and estimates of reserves in existing fields. According to the Hydrocarbon Unit of Bangladesh's Energy and Mineral Resource Division (HCU), the proved plus probable ultimate recoverable gas (URG) reserves estimate for Bangladesh's 22 existing gas fields is 20.44 TCF. Until June 2001, cumulative production totaled 4.3 TCF from 13 fields, leaving 16.14 TCF in proved plus probable reserves remaining countrywide. HCU also estimated an additional 8.03 TCF of possible reserves from existing fields. Titas, Habiganj, Kailashila, and Rashidpur fields, Bangladesh's four largest fields, together contain more than 55 percent of the country's total reserves and the majority of its development wells.

Field growth: Majority of the Petrobanga's gas fields has not been fully appraised leaving scope for field growth. This is further supported by the fact that Titas and Habiganj which have been producing for many years, have shown little pressure drop or any significant water production. For example, the initial estimate of URG at Titas field was 2.1 TCF in 1982, but it has produced 1.9 TCF (about 90% of its initial URG estimate) during the past 32 years without any pressure drop or water production. The use of new technologies and enhanced recovery techniques within existing fields can further increase reserves significantly. These include 3D seismic surveys -- Petrophysical thin bed analysis, Compression,

and Reservoir management.

New field discoveries: Different organisations have carried out a number of assessment studies on Bangladesh's hydrocarbon resource potential over the past several years. The 'Hydrocarbon Habitat Study' was the first comprehensive study that reviewed all geological provinces both onshore and offshore Bangladesh, conducted by Petrobanga with technical support from Well Drill in 1986. An intensive joint technical study on the hydrocarbon potential of Bangladesh was carried out by the Bangladesh Study Group (BSG), which represented four oil companies (Trend International Ltd, Idemitsu Oil Development Co. Ltd., Repsol Exploration Indonesia, and Eurafrep). There have been number of other studies conducted including ODA study, Shell and Unocal assessment, USGC studies and Hydrocarbon Unit Study. According to the HCU study, Bangladesh's total undiscovered resource potential is estimated to range from a minimum of 18.5 TCF to a maximum of 63.7 TCF, an average of 41.6 TCF.

Resource base lifecycle

There are stage development in a resource base lifecycle: Market growth, expansion of the resource base and promotion of reserves. Market growth: Initially only a fraction of the ultimate resource base may be recognised due to market immaturity with limited economic incentives. After the initial exploration and appraisal successes, the general economy and gas markets in particular will respond and grow, stimulating further exploration and market growth.

Expansion: Expansion of the resource base takes place in most prospective areas, although this may change as data are acquired. Henceforth, the technical database and knowledge tend to be localised in the discovered field areas. For example, 2D seismic data cover 50 percent of the proven petroleum system fairways of eastern Bangladesh but less than 30 percent of the western portion. The early stage of a resource base lifecycle is dominated by unproved reserves.

Promotion of reserves: Continual appraisal and development programmes and ongoing exploration in response to market incentives significantly enhance the technical database and knowledge of the petroleum systems. This allows more reserves to be classified or promoted to the proved category with increasing production dominating the later stage of the lifecycle. Assessment in Bangladesh, in comparison, demonstrates that resource base lifecycle is in the early stage with at least 70 percent in the unproved reserves.

Bangladesh is at a crucial stage of development of its energy sector with its substantial, naturally endowed gas resource base. This requires research and critical analysis for making important choices and timely decisions. This is necessary to successfully meet the country's domestic energy needs and at the same time generate new scope for additional commerce and economic growth for the country and its people.

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Sudan: A conflict in the making

FATIMA CHOWDHURY

As the international community remains focused on the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, the plight of another nation remains marginalised and almost unnoticed. The civil war in Sudan has lasted almost 20 years, claiming approximately two million lives, and leaving many more to seek shelter in neighbouring countries as refugees. Recently, a comprehensive peace deal was signed by the Sudan Government and rebels. But peace is fragile in an ever changing world and the shadows of Sudan's violent past seem to once again emerge to destabilise its present and threaten its future.

In 1952, Sudan was to be granted freedom based on an agreement between Britain and Egypt to allow a referendum on independence and free elections. A year later, the newly established Sudanese House of Representatives elected the Umma (People's) Party, with Abdullah Khalil as premier. But when freedom finally came in 1956, Sudan had a new leader, Army Chief Ibrahim Abboud. It was to be a new beginning, different from the one the people had known but as time would demonstrate, far from peaceful as it had been hoped.

Sudan is a diverse country and to merely state that would be an over simplification of a nation burdened with contradictions and complications in diversity. The North of Sudan is predominantly Muslim and hold the reins of political power. But the Christians and Animists in the South led by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) under John Garang challenged this political domination, leading to

the beginning of a long civil war. It remains unclear as to whether the South desired autonomy from the Muslim north or outright independence.

Every conflict, big or small, has its complications and consequences, and too often the international community gets tangled in deliberating a selfish intervention rather than seeking a solution. As a result, the international community was slow in its firm

ing dissatisfaction. The government in its eagerness to suppress the criticism of its economic reforms by some, failed to take into consideration the aspirations of many. As a result the Sharia law met with resistance in the South and soon enough the new law was abandoned. But the rebellion in the South was once again awakened.

Since independence, Sudan's political climate has been unstable and turbulent. The succession of govern-

mental and are concerned by what they see as prejudice against Christians in South Sudan. The new war on terrorism has also brought Sudan under scrutiny as a refuge for terrorist. And then there is the mounting pressure from Human Rights campaigners

Finally, in 2002, the Machakos Protocol was signed in Kenya. Compromises were made and the existing realities accepted to some extent. The south would accept the establishment of the Sharia law in the north and be allowed to seek self-determination after a six year period. The bitterness from years of conflict cannot be erased in a few weeks. Therefore, even though the peace process continued to evolve, hostilities did not totally cease.

A year later, after much talks and international intervention the government and the SPLA agreed to share the oil wealth and integration of troops in some areas. At present, the deal also encompasses the sharing of non-oil wealth. As the curtains fall on one crisis, another has begun to develop. The rebellion in predominantly Muslim West Darfur has already created 100,000 refugees in neighbouring Chad and left many dead. A nation devastated from one war is now about to enter another. How long will it be before the international community is once again stirred to action to prevent another long drawn-out civil war?

Until then the people of Sudan stand at the edge of uncertainty where the hopes of the present fade into the past and future seems even more unpredictable than before.

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response and timely intervention in the crisis. Thus, the situation in Sudan that could have been stemmed by a swift response continued unchecked.

The leaders of North and South Sudan in between held peace talks, each time the hopes of the people were raised only to be shattered by failures. In 1972, under the new President Jafaar al-Nimeri, a settlement for peace was negotiated with the South. An 11-year period of peace followed, only to be stirred once again in 1983.

The Sudanese government had implemented stringent economic reforms to comply with IMF directives. The government had the desire to strengthen its economy, but lacked the determination to implement it. Facing pressure from some traditionalist Muslims critical to the reforms, the government decided to introduce the Islamic Sharia law to pacify the emerg-

ments and poor leadership has led to economic, political and social degradation. In the present lies the direction to the future, but for the people of Sudan, their present was in a shambles and the direction to the future bleak and uncertain. However, when General Omar al-Bashir's government came to power in 1993, it would prove to be different from its predecessors in resilience and a clear ideology. The new government had close ties to the National Islamic Front led by Sheikh Hassan al-Turabi. Therefore it was not surprising that in 1991, al-Bashir's government once again introduced the controversial Sharia law.

The political situation in the south was also changing. The SPLA that began as a united front to combat the north divided to form two groups -- one remaining loyal to John Garang, the veteran SPLA leader, and the other

1996 and al-Bashir's government was able to win comfortably. But Sudan's internal turmoil had begun to create external concerns. The threat of terrorists using Sudan as a base for unfavourable and undesirable activities led the US government to launch a missile attack. A legitimate pharmaceutical plant was destroyed and the controversy led the US to end operations in Sudan quickly. But from it surfaced a power struggle between al-Bashir and al-Turabi. At the end, al-Bashir came out the victor, winning a second term in office, al-Turabi went into political oblivion after two years in prison.

Things never remain constant and with change comes new twists and turns to events. The US once again attempted to bring peace in Sudan. This was propelled by the fact that right-wing Christians exert greater influence in the present US govern-

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