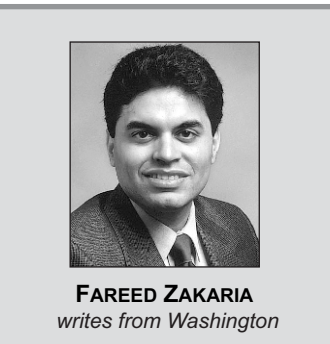


The limits of democracy



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

NO president has attached his name more completely to the promotion of democracy than George W Bush. He speaks of it with genuine passion and devoted virtually his entire second Inaugural to the subject. His administration talks constantly about its "freedom agenda" and interprets global events largely in such terms. Last summer, for example, as missiles, car bombs and IEDs exploded across Lebanon, Gaza and Iraq, Condoleezza Rice described the violence as the "birth pangs" of a new, democratic Middle East.

So it is striking to read this year's annual survey of "freedom in the world," released last week by

An administration that thinks of itself as tough has been almost romantic in its views of the world. There is good and evil out there. But there is also competence and incompetence, and that makes a crucial difference around the globe -- in fact, even in the United States.

Freedom House, a non-profit organisation that is engaged in promoting democracy around the globe. The report points out that 2006 was a bad year for liberty, under attack from creeping authoritarianism in Venezuela and Russia, a coup in Thailand, massive corruption in Africa and a host of more subtle reversals.

"The percentage of countries designated as free has failed to increase for nearly a decade and suggests that these trends may be contributing to a developing freedom stagnation," writes Freedom House director of research, Arch Puddington, in an essay released with the rankings. Puddington also calls attention to the "pushback" against democracy. Regimes across the world are closing down nongovernmental organizations, newspapers and other groups that advocate for human rights. And, I would add, what is most striking is

that these efforts are not being met with enormous criticism. Democracy proponents are on the defensive in many places.

What explains this paradox -- of freedom's retreat, even with a US administration vociferous in promoting democracy? Some part of the explanation lies in the global antipathy to the US president. "We have all been hurt by the association with the Bush administration," Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the Egyptian activist, told me.

"Bush's arrogance has turned people off the idea of democracy," says Larry Diamond, co-editor of the Journal of Democracy. But he goes on: "There's a lot more to it than that. We need to face up to the fact that in many developing countries democracy is not working very well." Diamond points to several countries where elections have been followed by governmental paralysis, corruption and

ethnic warfare.

The poster child for this decline has to be Nigeria, a country often lauded for its democracy. In fact, the place is in free fall -- an oil-rich country with per capita GDP down to \$390 (from \$1,000 20 years ago), a ranking below Bangladesh on the United Nations Human Development Index, and with a third of the country having placed itself under Sharia. The new Freedom House survey rates Haiti higher now because it held elections last year. But does anyone believe that those polls will change the essential reality in Haiti -- that it is a failed state?

The basic problem confronting the developing world today is not an absence of democracy but an absence of governance. From Iraq to the Palestinian territories to Nigeria to Haiti, this is the

cancer that is eating away at the lives of people across the globe, plunging countries into chaos, putting citizens' lives and livelihoods at risk. It is what American foreign policy should be focused on. But the president's freedom agenda sees the entire complex process of political and economic development through one simple lens, which produces bad analysis and bad outcomes.

Consider Iraq. The administration has constantly argued that Iraq has witnessed amazing political progress over the last four years only to be undermined by violence. In fact, Iraq has seen its politics and institutions fall apart since the American invasion. Its state was dismantled, its economy disrupted, its social order overturned and its civic institutions and community corroded by sectarianism. Its three communities were never brought together to hammer out a basic deal on how they could live together.

The only things that did take place in Iraq were elections (and the writing of a Constitution that is widely ignored). Those elections had wondrous aspects, but they

also divided the country into three communities and hardened these splits. To describe the last four years as a period of political progress requires a strange definition of political development.

The administration now rewards democracies with aid. But why not have a more meaningful measure? Why not reward countries when they protect human rights, reduce corruption and increase the quality of governance? "Our aid should be conditional on absolute standards," says Diamond. "The European Union has forced change on countries that want to join it by demanding real progress on tough issues."

An administration that thinks of itself as tough has been almost romantic in its views of the world. There is good and evil out there. But there is also competence and incompetence, and that makes a crucial difference around the globe -- in fact, even in the United States.

Fareed Zakaria is Editor, Newsweek International.



Migration, remittance and the gender gap

Development aid adopted a strong gender focus, at least in its rhetoric. We know that poverty reduction requires addressing the gender gap in rights and entitlements. Migration offers possibilities in this regard, but could also lead to a regression.

Thérèse Blanchet

REMITTANCE is a god-sent manna for the Bangladesh economy, and the announcement that it has increased by 150 percent in the last 5 years is good news (Porimol Palma, The Daily Star, January 11). As everyone knows, remittance feeds foreign exchange reserve and sustains the value of the Taka. It injects capital in the economy and considering that most workers are unskilled or semi-skilled, one can expect a major part effectively reaching out to the poorer strata of the society.

This is recognized in the World Bank Report 2006, which estimates that remittance reduced poverty by 6 percent in Bangladesh. Thus compensating for shrinking development aid. No doubt, migration is an important resource for the

national economy, as well as for individual migrant households.

Successful migrant households can improve their consumption levels, purchase land, build better houses, marry in style, send children to good schools, provide quality health care and invest in profitable enterprises. These investments have a multiplier effect, resulting in the expansion of local economies. In areas with a high level of cross-border migration, goods and services bought with remittance are highly visible. From shops filled with costly electronic goods to well equipped private health clinics and luxurious homes, migration wealth glitters and creates envy.

Other impacts are less visible. I wish to bring attention here to the skewed gender distribution of cross-border labor migrants in Bangladesh and the impact this is

likely to have on gender balance and poverty reduction.

After reading Porimol Palma's article, which I found well informed and well written, I eagerly searched for some gender segregated data on migrants but found none. When the Bangladesh government imposed restrictions on female migration in the past, women were few among migrants and were even fewer in official government records (less than 1 percent). Following a gradual lifting of the ban on women's domestic employment in the Middle East from December 2003 more women were able to migrate legally, but we do not know much about the impact of this liberalization.

According to the BMET's latest statistics, 59,681 women migrated between 1991 and November 2006, making up less than 1.5 percent of the overall migration

flow. Official records show no major change. Wishing to fill in a yawning gap, the Dristhi Research Centre in 2005 carried out a national survey to obtain sex segregated data on cross-border labor migrants, covering both documented and undocumented workers.

The survey found that approximately 437,000 women were working abroad, making up 13.6 percent of cross-border labor migrants (*Documenting the Undocumented*, Blanchet, Razzaque, Biswas, USAID, AED, SDC, 2005). Discrepancy between this result and the official records show the large number of women migrating through unofficial channels.

There are good reasons to believe that cross-border migrant women, to a greater extent than men, come from poor households. Although a good part of these migrants may not feed FOREX reserves, because they have no access to legal channels for their remittance and probably use *hundi* or other informal channels, it cannot be denied that their earnings contribute toward reducing poverty.

If one is concerned about the

poverty reduction effect of migration, surely, one must include undocumented migrants, and take into consideration the sex of the migrants, for it could well be that migration wealth accruing through female labor is not disposed in the same manner as that accruing through men.

Incidentally migration, which is illegal from the Bangladesh government's point of view, can be legal for the recipient country. Such was the case of the 31 women who were arrested at Zia airport on their way to Lebanon. They held valid work visas for Lebanon, but were issued faked clearance certificates by BMET officers and were not allowed to proceed. The Daily Star (November 19, 2006) used the catchy title "trafficked women" to describe the plight of these women. If men had encountered the same problem, one doubts that the term "trafficked men" would have been used. The media have a propensity to project women as helpless victims. This unfortunate tendency should be checked, even though the image has an amazingly enduring sale value.

Female labor migration continues to be regarded with ambivalence and suspicion, even after legal restrictions were considerably relaxed in 2004. Measures meant to protect women often turn out to be the cause for additional hassles and extra costs for them. For example, the guardian's permission that women must obtain to issue a passport reportedly adds an additional 5,000 taka (unofficial fee to cover police work), and two to three months delay in the procedure.

Men don't need to go through this. We found evidence that in the past women paid higher bribes to airport officials than men in order to be allowed to leave the country. One may ask what women gain through such "protection."

Surely, who earns and who controls remittance matters. With men making up at least 86 percent of the cross-border labor migrants, women are most often cast in the role of dependant family members and left at home. This is not new, but migration adds new wealth and new power that could weigh on the gender balance and contribute to widening the gender gap. For

REMITTANCE SCENARIO 2001-06		
Year	Amount of remittance (in millions)	Number of migrants
2001	\$ 2,071.03	1,88,965
2002	\$ 2,847.79	2,25,256
2003	\$ 3,177.63	2,54,190
2004	\$ 3,561.45	2,72,985
2005	\$ 4,249.87	2,52,702
2006	\$ 4,929.04 (till Nov)	3,81,516

example, male labor migration may reinforce the ability to seclude and curtail the movement and autonomy of young wives in their husband's homes.

In a research conducted on male migration to Italy, it was found that valuable assets, such as land, are not purchased in women's names but in the migrant's name, or his father's, his brother's or his son's name. This contrasts with female migration, which allows women to acquire land and other wealth in their name, and encourages autonomy and self-reliance. One can see that migration, and the wealth it procures, transforms society in ways that are not gender neutral.

Development aid adopted a strong gender focus, at least in its rhetoric. We know that poverty reduction requires addressing the gender gap in rights and entitlements. Migration offers possibilities in this regard, but could also lead to a regression. The effects of migration and remittance on Bangladesh society deserve a better study. Migration is too important a field to be left solely to the macro-economists.

Therese Blanchet is Director of Dristhi Research Centre.

The same old story

It is relieving that the international media continues to report on Bangladesh. It is also assuring that they remain committed to reporting on democracy and electoral reform in Bangladesh. Without their efforts, it is questionable whether the international community would have any clear understanding of Bangladesh's political situation.

Calum Stewart

THE international press is far more interested in what those in Bangladesh say, as they remain predictably inattentive to the diverse array of political action and intrigue that continually evolves in Bangladesh.

After weeks of political turmoil, Bangladesh's political situation has finally begun to receive the international attention that a constitutional crisis deserves. As Fahkrudin Ahmed addressed the nation for the first time since taking over as chief adviser to the caretaker government, and as MA Aziz finally resigned as chief election commissioner, the international press stood by to carefully monitor the latest developments in a political project that is focused on rescuing the electoral process and democracy in Bangladesh.

Although it is encouraging that the international press is willing to broadcast the latest developments of a political crisis that merits reporting, their coverage could, at the same time, discourage Bangladeshis as it remains static, narrow and myopic even as the situation changes from day to day.

International press reports on Bangladesh for January 22 were focussed largely on two key events: the first public announcement made by the new CA to the caretaker government, Fahkrudin Ahmed, since taking over the position; and the resignation of MA Aziz from the post of CEC. YP Rajesh, writing for Reuters, noted that: "Bangladesh's new interim administration failed to set a deadline on Sunday for the disputed elections that were due this month, but said that he would hand over

power to an elected government at the earliest."

The Associated Press took much the same line, quoting Ahmed as saying: "Our motto is to hold a free, fair and participatory election," whilst stating that, "Ahmed did not name a new date for the vote." Similarly, Reuters quoted Ahmed as saying: "I hope that a newly constituted election commission would be able to hold a free and fair election in due course."

MWC News alternatively ran Aziz's resignation as the most significant news to come from Bangladesh saying: "The head of Bangladesh's Election Commission has resigned after months of protests by opposition parties that led to the postponement of polls that had been scheduled for Monday." Reuters also remarked that,

"Aziz's resignation is considered the first step ahead of preparing the troubled South Asian nation for polls as it allows the interim administration to reform and reconstitute the Election Commission."

The international coverage of Bangladesh remains centred on a dated narrative which comprises of political antagonism and violent protests, the state of emergency, and stalled elections and promises of electoral reform. As the situation evolves and changes, reports from the international media exclusively report the primary political projects espoused by the elite, whilst ignoring other political events around Bangladesh. The anti-crime drive, the widespread arrests and the alleged deaths in custody are more generally absent from international reports.

The only deviation from this trend was in the BBC's report, where they pointed to Ahmed's promise to crack down on corruption and clean up the administration, in passing. The evolving positions of the two large electoral blocks have also been missed. The international media has yet to report BNP's concern, and partial resistance, to the arrests and alleged harassment of their party members throughout the anti-corruption drive.

Likewise, the relative praise and expression by the Awami League with the reform recipe proposed by the new Chief Advisor is not reported. Instead, international reports repeat the generic, and almost meaningless, calls by both parties for elections to be held as soon as possible. This is accompanied by dated background information about the Awami League's demands for electoral reform and charges of electioneering by the BNP. The international press is largely focussed on developments in democracy and electoral reform. It is relieving that the international media continues to report on Bangladesh.

It is also assuring that they remain committed to reporting on democracy and electoral reform in Bangladesh. Without their efforts, it is questionable whether the international community would have any clear understanding of Bangladesh's political situation.

Yet they would be well advised to pay closer attention to much of what happens in Bangladesh, and look for more concrete political realities to accompany the agenda being forwarded by the most prominent elite.

This kind of approach would also make for a deeper, broader and more critical analysis of Bangladesh. Instead, by focussing only on the electoral process, and by parroting high-level agenda, they risk becoming the international mouthpieces of Bangladesh's elites, as they ignore other voices in Bangladesh.

Calum Stewart is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Getting the voter list right

Democratic governance requires the existence of free and fair elections conducted with a broadly enfranchised electorate. In order to realize this precept, then, all eligible electors should be included in the electoral roll, and such inclusion affirms their right to vote in the election. The other principle of voter registration is the obvious corollary of the first, namely, that it should prevent the exclusion of eligible citizens from the list.

Sadrul Hasan Mazumder

DEMOCRATIC election systems require a good electoral roll prepared following certain criteria, and a mechanism for identifying eligible voters and preventing ineligible persons from voting. Such a mechanism helps guaranteeing the "one person one vote" principle by preventing people from voting more than once in an election. It is an accurate electoral roll which is the fundamental document for setting up the criteria of a good election, and on the basis of which the election officials identify fake or false voters on election day. Thus, a fair and democratic election completely depends on the accuracy of the electoral roll.

The right of all adult citizens to participate in the affairs of the government is one of the cornerstones of democracy. As the foundation stone of democracy, especially where it is a parliamentary form of government, integrity and accuracy of the voter roll are of paramount importance, which ideally means the inclusion of all legally eligible persons in the electoral roll. An under-age voter may creep into the electoral roll, but it is undonable to disenfranchise any eligible voter just by exclusion of his or her name from the electoral roll.

The electoral roll is the fundamental component of any voting system. Enrollment procedures, therefore, need to strike the right balance between the need to be rigorous to ensure integrity of the

roll, and the need for flexibility to ensure that people's right to enroll and vote are protected.

Democratic governance requires the existence of free and fair elections conducted with a broadly enfranchised electorate. In order to realize this precept, then, all eligible electors should be included in the electoral roll, and such inclusion affirms their right to vote in the election. The other principle of voter registration is the obvious corollary of the first, namely, that it should prevent the exclusion of eligible citizens from the list.

Controversies over the electoral roll had arisen during the last few elections. But the whole nation has witnessed the recent controversies regarding electoral matters, of which the question of getting an accurate voter list was much discussed, and the new caretaker administration has focused on it.

It appears that the main concern of preparing an accurate voter list has superseded all constitutional obligations, and advisor for Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Barrister Mainul Hossain, has rightly remarked that they should be given as much time as needed to finish the task they have been assigned. The recent debate over introduction of voter's identity card or national identity card should be resolved immediately because, beyond that, finding out the means of getting an accurate voter list is important and urgent.

Here, basically, lies the biggest challenge, which demands broader cooperation and support

from political parties unanimously. The entire process can be expedited only by reformulation of the Election Commission. The civil society organizations, along with the NGOs, should come forward with more boldness in strengthening the efforts of the caretaker administration to establish an independent Election Commission free from political interference. The initiative of the civil society and NGOs will help bridge the gap between the political parties and the Commission, which can be strengthened through collaboration between the two agencies.

The manner, in which the voter registration takes place, as well as the complementary responsibilities of the election administration officials and citizens, vary considerably from one country to another. Getting registered in the voter roll, in some instances, is the responsibility of the citizens. Compilation of voter list for the purpose of elections to the parliament is based on the constitution, which vests responsibility for preparation of the electoral roll with the Election Commission. Under constitutional provisions, there has to be one electoral roll for each constituency for the purpose of elections to parliament.

Another important issue to be addressed is ensuring the right to franchise of the expatriate Bangladeshis. Non-resident Bangladeshis, numbering more than 2.5 million, are still considered ineligible to exercise their franchise in elections. Once the expatriates are included in the

electoral roll, it will be a must for the Commission to take necessary arrangement for receiving their votes, which is not possible in the conventional system. Relevant laws need to be amended for ensuring the expatriates' right to franchise.

The caretaker government, however, should seriously consider the following issues with a view to rectifying the electoral roll within the shortest possible time:

- Engaging EMOs to monitor/check the electoral roll throughout the country, particularly in areas where there were
- Verifying the accuracy of the information on the voters' lists by conducting sample surveys following a statistically accepted method.
- Identifying extreme changes in the number of registrants in a region, the current electoral roll can be compared with that of the previous elections.
- For determining duplicate registrations, and the registration of ineligible voters, various computer applications can be used for the existing election database.

The caretaker government should immediately consider formation of a vigilance team comprising volunteers from various EMOs and representatives of various political parties. These vigilance teams will be engaged in scrutinizing the electoral roll of the respective areas under direct supervision of the district election officer, and their work will be coordinated by the thana nirbahi Officer (TNO) at upazilla level.

If considered, the Commission should go for immediate implementation of such a program for timely and effective completion of their activities, resulting in an accurate electoral roll acceptable to all and yes, it is still possible.

Sadrul Hasan Mazumder is a development activist.