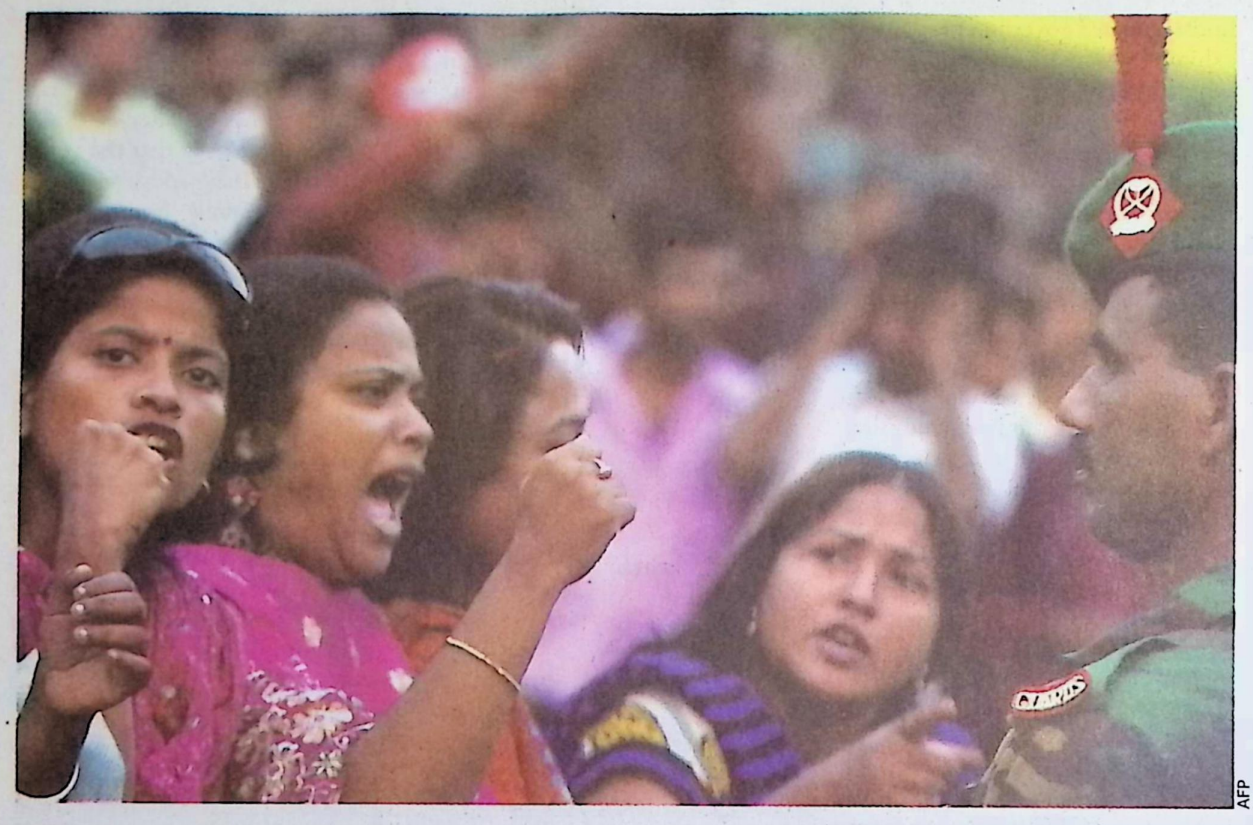


AFP

famous by GrameenPhone was spurred during democratic rule. The better flow of information and communication not only generated economic benefits, but also enhanced public consciousness dramatically, allowing the media to raise issues of accountability that we take for granted now."

We have thus far considered economic growth, or growth in GDP per person. Real GDP per person is a simple measure of the standard of living. Another such measure is the United Nation's Human Development Indicator (HDI). Bangladesh's HDI was 0.347 in 1975, rising to 0.422 in 1990 and 0.53 in 2004. That is, the post-1990 rise was larger than the rise between 1975 and 1990.

That the pace in development was stronger under elected governments than those before 1990 is supported by two other measures: life expectancy at birth and infant mortality rate. According to the World Bank data, life expectancy increased from 47 years in 1977 to 55 years in 1990 -- an annual average rise of 0.1 year. In 2005, life expectancy at birth stood at 64 years -- an annual average rise of 0.6 year since 1990. The same database also shows that infant mortality per thousand live births fell from 142 in 1975 to 100 in 1990 and 54 in 2005.

There appears to be no evidence in the data that democracy has been detrimental to development in Bangladesh, and we should treat blanket statements such as "through the 36 years after independence politicians gave us nothing good" with a grain of salt.

This is not to say that things couldn't have been better. Living standards have risen at much more rapid paces in India and China than in Bangladesh. Clearly, both our politics and economy could have done without the periodic instability and endemic corruption. The World Bank study cited above notes that elected governments are likely to perform better when they face strong checks and balances, and citizens are relatively better informed. Rather than a period of benevolent dictatorship, our development process will be better assisted by a democracy improved along these lines.

Jyoti Rahman *is a macroeconomist and a contributor to the Drishtipat Writers' Collective.*

1. IMF Article IV Report on Bangladesh, July 2007 (http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/cat/longres.cfm?sk=21170.0).

2. World Bank 2005, 'Politics: does democracy help?' in *Economic Growth in the 1990s: Learning from a Decade of Reform* (http://www1.worldbank.org/prem/lessons1990s/chaps/10-Ch10.pdf).

3. Momen, Facts vs Fads: Democracy and Economic Performance, Progressive Bangladesh, April 2007 (http://www.progressivebangladesh.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=25&Itemid=35).

4. Details available at http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/statistics/about/.