

A hobbled Phoenix

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PIERRE LANDELL-MILLS

NEXT year, Bangladesh celebrates its 40th year of independence. It is a good moment to pause and reflect on what has been achieved. In 1971, Bangladesh arose Phoenix-like from the ashes of civil war a new nation ravaged but full of hope. Despite the carnage and betrayed trust, Bangladeshis step by step rebuilt their economy.

Over the past four decades of Independence, this remarkable country has raised its per capita incomes ever more rapidly, outstripping almost all of the other least developed countries. It also dramatically improved almost all its social indicators. The status and education of women have radically improved. This outcome is all the more surprising in the absence of significant mineral or oil wealth.

These achievements are well illustrated by the findings of a researcher, a colleague of mine, who had tracked the conditions of a village in southern Bangladesh in the twenty-year period between 1977 and 1997.

In the mid-1970s, this village was extremely poor most people wore no shoes, the men had only one new lungi a year, the women were rarely seen, farmers harvested only one crop a year and were forced to travel to Sylhet to seek seasonal employment at pitiful wages. The village was so isolated it took almost two days to reach it travelling in part by boat and part by walking.

Returning in the mid 1990s the researcher found conditions in this village transformed. The place was no longer isolated; he could drive all the way into the village. Even the children wore shoes and everyone seemed much better dressed. Women greeted him openly with smiles. The farmers were now quite prosperous, harvesting three

crops a year.

He found life expectancy had risen by 15 years and infant and maternal mortality had more than halved. And the birth rate had fallen dramatically, so that each child could be much better cared for. I imagine that if he returned again today he would find the conditions even better though those living through these great changes in living conditions often fail to notice them, so preoccupied is everyone with day to day challenges.

What is so surprising to outside observers is that these improvements in people's welfare have been achieved despite abysmal governance problems misguiding nationalisation in the 1970s, followed by military rule in the 1980s, and then two decades of divisive and bickering "democracy" where the winners of each election saw power as a means of self-advancement and refused to respect the basic principles of parliamentary government. Not surprisingly the electorate, every time they had a chance, without exception, threw out the ruling party.

How can one explain this paradoxical above average development performance despite being hobbled by a corrupt, incompetent and self-serving ruling class which placed Bangladesh constantly close to the bottom of the World Bank's league table for governance and the Transparency International corruption perception index? Scholars have struggled to find the answer.

Economic researchers have argued that Bangladesh's relatively good economic performance was primarily because the country embraced market economics, after an initial bleak period of socialist planning, allowing private firms over the years an increasingly free hand. Ministers of finance were mostly prudent, never allowing too much debt to accumulate and husbanding the



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country's foreign exchange reserves.

Some social scientists attribute Bangladesh's progress in education, literacy, health and nutrition in large part to the dynamism and entrepreneurship of its remarkable NGOs. In truth, despite all their faults, successive governments did invest over the years in health, education and rural infrastructure, supported strongly by Bangladesh's development partners. And credit must also go to the governments for allowing NGOs the space to contribute. The reality was an effective if somewhat wary partnership between government agencies and the NGO community.

My own conviction is that the most important contribution to economic and social development has come from ordinary Bangladeshi citizens who have shown again and again great enterprise and resilience, working extraordinarily hard to better themselves. The political class has failed them.

With wise policies, integrity and a consensual approach to solving national problems, Bangladesh could have grown much faster, may be even as fast as China. Instead, successive governments have served the narrow interests of the elite in power and the bureaucrats who support them.

The outcome has been a power sector that has been allowed to degrade disas-

trously, a port system so inefficient it costs the economy several billion dollars a year, a self-serving statist approach to telecommunications that has hobbled Bangladesh's entry into the digital age, management of public services that has been stunningly inefficient, a state enterprise sector that was a major drain on the exchequer and an obstacle to private enterprise the list of governance failures is long indeed.

I vividly remember in my first month as head of the World Bank Office in 1994 being visited by a delegation from the delta area to complain that the Flood Action Plan we supported was devastating the lives of the local villagers. This Plan, full of good intentions, was typical of large-scale projects dreamt up by ambitious engineers, favoured by government and aid officials, and imposed on populations that were given little opportunity to participate in decisions that would have a profound impact on their welfare.

Fortunately, we were successful in halting this misconceived mega project despite the vested interests. This experience demonstrated the need for more accountable government, as well as more accountable donors.

Development "experts" increasingly accept two fundamental propositions: first, that good governance is central to achieving rapid and sustainable improvements in living standards and, second though equally important, that good governance will only come about if citizens demand it to the point where those in power are forced to listen. Good governance can never be imposed from outside; the pressures on politicians to reform must come from within a society.

So, how might this happen in Bangladesh? In many ways the trend in the past 20 years has been retrograde. Bangladesh appears to have become an increasingly polarised society as a result of the highly divisive and disruptive strategies adopted by the two main political parties.

In the 1990s it seemed as though the one state institution that was respected for its integrity was the Supreme Court. When the country needed someone utterly trustworthy to head the new

caretaker government in 1996, people turned to the then most recently retired chief justice, a man of impeccable reputation. Today, it seems the public would not have the same degree of trust in their retired chief justices.

The Court has been dragged into the struggle for power and, as a consequence, the political elite have even succeeded in undermining peoples' faith in the justice system. This rupture urgently needs to be repaired by ensuring that those appointed to the Supreme Court are chosen by an independent judicial commission based only on their legal skills, their independence of the political class and their unquestioned integrity.

Another instrument that is key for accountable government is citizens' right to information. Across the world historically those in power have almost always preferred to keep their citizens in the dark precisely because this made it far more difficult for civil society to hold political leaders and their bureaucrats accountable.

Important progress was made in January 2009 when the new Parliament passed an RTI Act confirming the 2008 RTI Ordinance of the caretaker government. But this Act will only serve its purpose if the government puts in place all the necessary measures to make it effective and if the courts are ready to punish officials who withhold information, as the courts have in India.

The present government's proposed Digital Bangladesh programme could improve the amount and accessibility of information on public programmes and policies, while also supporting the introduction of a variety of e-government systems. If pursued with determination these would greatly enhance governance.

Achieving accountable government is inevitably a long-term process requiring the progressive dismantling of the whole apparatus of political patronage which underpins the present political system, undermines professionalism, and drives corruption.

This can only happen if all the elements of civil society professional associations, business organisations, inde-

pendent policy research centres, and NGOs, as well as the independent mediasystematically participate in demanding a truly independent judiciary and transparent and accountable agencies staffed by officials selected and promoted on merit alone. This will not happen overnight but a start can be made today by each adopting and pledging to adhere to ethical Codes of Conduct.

So long as patronage politics works and the main political parties are wedded to mastaans and goons, Bangladesh will remain hobbled by poor governance. Take, as an example, this press report: "Frustrated over car requisition, business leaders have said they would rather provide the police with vehicles than see their vehicles requisitioned. The leaders of the apex trade body, the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) also vented their frustration over extortion and mugging, and suggested a special cell on prevention" (September 17, bdnews24.com). Bangladesh has still a long way to go to establish the rule of law.

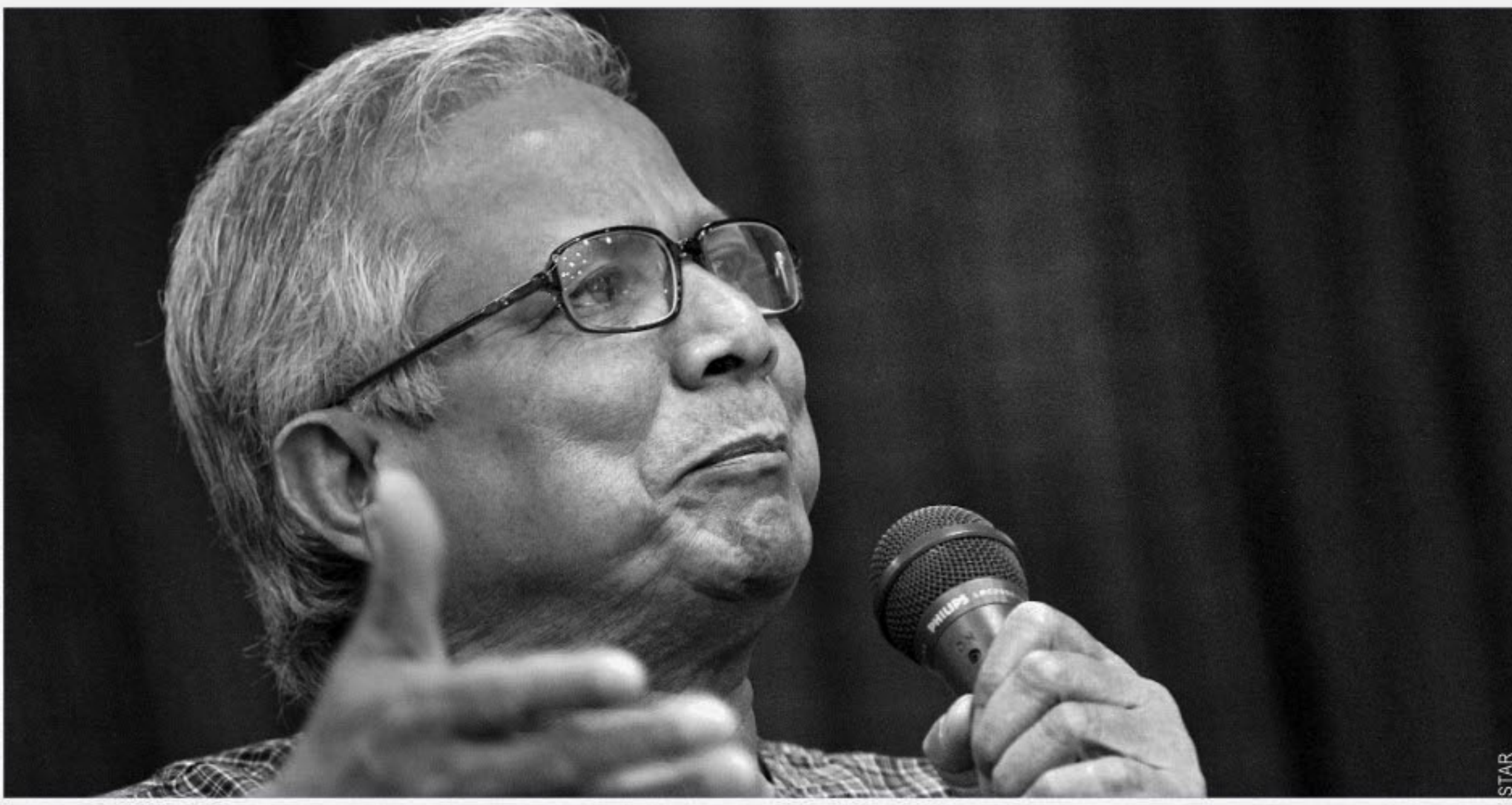
Only when citizens start to assert their right to honest, transparent and accountable government will Bangladeshi politics start to change. Those with resources are best placed to lead this challenge to the existing debilitating political practices. Up to now the business leaders have sought to placate or join the political class rather campaign for reform.

Instead the FBCCI, for example, should assert its independence, refuse to be dictated to by the regime in power and give a lead in seeking reforms in the port, the power sector, the courts, and all the other dysfunctional parts of the state that obstruct development.

Of course, the business community alone cannot bring about the changes even if they were motivated to try. If Bangladesh is to rise to the new challenges of the 21st century and transform the lives of its people, then all elements of society must work together for good governance.

(By courtesy of Prothom Alo) Mr. Pierre Landell-Mills is a former Permanent Representative of the World Bank to Bangladesh.

Proud of Prof. Yunus



Over one hundred fifty countries are benefiting from his microcredit idea, and his new "Social Business" concept is spreading like wildfire around the world. It is unfortunate that Bangladeshi leaders have failed to use his talent to promote Bangladesh.

MOHAMMAD ALI BHUIYAN

PROF Yunus is known around the world as the "Father of Microcredit" and a Bangladeshi, and the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize was just an icing on the cake. There are many others who received Nobel Peace Prize, but their demand and glory faded as soon as the next winner was announced. But, Prof. Yunus is an exception to the norm.

Five years after his receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Prof. Yunus is still a highly esteemed Nobel laureate to the world. Universities, businesses, NGOs, governments, and other agencies around the world are constantly trying to secure a slot in his calendar. Some have been trying for years and still have not been able to get him to come, even if they are willing to pay a substantial sum of money.

So, I was not surprised when I read that the Norwegian so-called journalist (I would say irresponsible journalist) could not get an appointment with Prof. Yunus for six months. I have to say that when a journalist with the support of an interest group makes a documentary based on a ten-year old incident and

only presents a part of the facts to the world to gain cheap popularity, that journalist is certainly a black sheep of the journalist community.

It was unfortunate that the same partial story received widespread coverage in all Bangladeshi news media and many joined this unfortunate smear campaign against Prof. Yunus. Thanks to the Norwegian government for the quick response to clear all the confusion, which made many look like fools as it was quite clear that the entire news episode was just a baseless smear campaign against Prof. Yunus.

It has been said by some people that an individual does not represent the image of a country. It is probably true in most cases. There are millions of us who represent Bangladesh to the world in our own ways. But, I would also like to say that our individual representation is extremely limited.

When Bangladesh tops the list of countries in corruption, extremist groups carry out acts of violence, political unrest and strikes hamper economic growth, then we need a bigger than life figure to counter all these negative

images. We all should be proud that Prof. Yunus has been that positive figure representing Bangladesh around the world.

I have had the opportunity to closely observe Prof. Yunus and his contributions to humanity during the last few years. I have found him as an incredibly smart, honest, and visionary individual who constantly comes up with brilliant ideas.

The entire world is benefiting from his visionary thinking and practical ideas. Heads of states of many countries are trying to meet with him to use his wisdom and many are making tremendous progress.

Over one hundred fifty countries are benefiting from his microcredit idea, and his new "Social Business" concept is spreading like wildfire around the world. It is unfortunate that Bangladeshi leaders have failed to use his talent to promote Bangladesh. Instead, many are trying to undermine his contributions to Bangladesh and the rest of the world.

Finally, I would like to say that the recent baseless smear campaign against Prof. Yunus has given all of us Bangladeshis an opportunity to understand the fact that Prof. Yunus is an incredible asset for Bangladesh. It is also our responsibility to help those who are suffering from narrow mindedness and petty jealousy to accept the reality and make good use of the good name of Prof. Yunus to move Bangladesh forward.

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Liberating politics

We do not like dictatorial democracy. Nor do we invite military dictatorship. What we need is pure democracy in which there will be secularism, full religious freedom and protection of human rights.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE present political scenario appears to be showing some ominous signs. People in general consider the present condition as politics of intolerance, which may ultimately lead us to confrontational politics as it existed before 1/11. This is certainly not congenial for moving forward to democracy.

Our freedom fighters did not make such great sacrifices for the enjoyment of the benefits of a free country by some privileged groups or persons. They sacrificed their lives for setting up a democratic and secular country free from exploitation and injustice.

Due to the assassination of Bangabandhu and subsequent military takeover, the people became subjects and the dream of Shiekh Mujib was shattered. The anti-freedom groups revived and consolidated their position with assistance from the military dictators who never believed in encouraging people to work for establishment of democracy.

As compared to many developing countries Bangladesh has made remarkable progress during the last four decades despite political instability and frequent natural calamities. Revival of democratic government in 1990 gave us new hope for working for establishing democracy on firm footing.

It is unfortunate that our political leaders failed to work together to establish a true democratic country. Their failure resulted in emergence of a civil-military interim government in 2007. Our valiant people forced the said government to hand over power to the elected representatives.

Our opposition parties, particularly the BNP, appear to be determined to dislodge the government, which was formed hardly 23 months back with a thumping majority in the parliament. It is apparent that by using the eviction of Begum Zia BNP has not been able to extract any appreciable level of sympathy from the public. Her call for hartal as a protest against her eviction does not appear to be proper because it increased the suffering of common people.

We do not like dictatorial democracy. Nor do we invite military dictatorship. What we need is pure democracy in which there will be secularism, full religious freedom and protection of human rights. There has been enough damage to democracy, economy and human



rights due to 1/11. This loss has to be recouped through tolerance of both the sides, government and opposition. If this is not done democratic politics will be endangered. We should be alert to avoid this danger.

In a parliamentary democracy the government and the opposition must participate actively. This is necessary for good governance. Strictly speaking, the BNP has failed to play its part well. In

fact, its failure to fulfill its responsibility has created a sense of suspicion about its respect for democracy. Return to culture of hartal is its greatest mistake. The people of the country, it appears, no longer wants hartal. Why BNP has chosen is not clear. In fact announcement of hartal appears to have weakened its position.

In a parliamentary democracy the opposition party is known as "shadow government" and the leader of the opposition as "shadow prime minister." If the opposition becomes weak then democracy becomes weak. If the opposition

disassociates itself from governance then there will be increase in corruption due to the absolute power of the government, which will result in disregard of accountability by the government. As such, there cannot be good governance. The need for a strong opposition is essential for our smooth journey to democracy.

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