

# The democracy vs development debate

*A textbook example of a false dichotomy*

M HARUN UZ ZAMAN

**A**dichotomy can be defined as the presence of two alternatives that are jointly exhaustive (only these two alternatives, and no more than these two, exist) and mutually exclusive (the existence of each alternative excludes the other). A false dichotomy arises when a dichotomy is believed to exist when in reality, it does not—there are either more than two alternatives or the alternatives are not mutually exclusive. The recent advocacy by some for the argument that Bangladesh needs development before democracy fits this textbook definition of a false dichotomy remarkably well.

The proponents of the development before democracy argument contend that Bangladesh may have to make some "pragmatic" compromises with the "utopian" ideal of democracy. After all, people need food before they need rights, and getting the economy in good order is much more important than a purportedly good system of governance. However, many people may not know or realise that this line of thinking is hardly new; it is something that the people of Bangladesh has heard and defeated before, say about fifty years ago, when we were part of a certain country called Pakistan, and was ruled by a certain military dictator named General Ayub Khan. This idea rests on certain premises, all highly questionable, if not patently false.

The first premise is that certain conditions must be present, such as a well-educated citizenry, certain institutions, a "culture of tolerance," etc., before a country can have democracy. This premise has a fatal flaw. It ignores the very foundational character of democracy. Democracy is not simply a system of government run by elected representatives of the people. Democracy can be viewed as an arrangement, a social contract if you will, by which a nation agrees to live together and be governed by a set of principles, rules and



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institutions. Of course, there can be other arrangements, such as a monarchy, a dictatorship or an oligarchy by which a nation can also live together and be governed. The critical difference between democracy and the other systems of government is that the former is based on the consent of the people and the latter are not. This makes democracy the best foundation, if not the only workable foundation, on which the entire edifice of a modern nation can be built. Moreover, with the consent of the people as its defining principle, democracy has a moral legitimacy that other systems of governance lack. If we accept the proposition that democracy is foundational, then it needs neither any preconditions, such as a well-educated citizenry, nor is obligated to

produce any agreeable consequences, such as economic development, for its justification.

The second premise for the anti-democratic argument hinges on the purported need for political stability for economic development. Such stability, the argument goes, can be better achieved under an authoritarian regime rather than in a democracy. Both prongs of this premise, that economic development is unachievable without political stability, and stability, in turn, is unachievable under democracy, are utterly flawed. For most of its 46-year history, Bangladesh has experienced very little political stability. Yet, Bangladesh has seen remarkable economic development over half of its history, which shows that the need for stability for development might be over-

stated. Also, it is not clear that stability cannot be achieved under democracy. It is true that an autocracy can achieve some measure of stability, but only in the short run. It is not long before an autocrat will stumble. Such disruptive events are not exactly conducive to stability. Democracy, on the other hand, tends to experience instability during its formative years. Over the long-term, as democracy matures, the polity becomes increasingly more stable. This is not just an appealing proposition but is borne out by empirical evidence. Let us try the following exercise: rank three countries, namely Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, in order of their practice of democracy, and then rank them in order of their experienced political stability. I think it should be obvious

to any sensible person that the country that experienced the most democracy, that is India, also experienced the most stability. Not surprisingly, the country that experienced the least democracy, namely Pakistan, also experienced the least stability.

Finally, the false premise that takes the medal for its inanity is that "western" democracy is not suitable for non-western countries, because of the differences in culture, social structures and histories. Another variant of this view is that western democracy needs to be tailored into some form of a quasi-autocracy to suit the "culture" of a country. To paraphrase Ayub Khan, Pakistan needed a democracy "suited to the genius of its people." It is reasonable to recognise that the overarching idea of democracy does need to adapt to a country's cultural and other idiosyncrasies. This adaptation, however, cannot be such that it defeats the very essence of the idea of democracy as a system of self-governance. In recent history, many dictatorships or quasi-dictatorships, attempted to deprive the people of the right to self-governance while disingenuously claiming to make this kind of adaptation. Ayub Khan's "basic democracy" is perhaps one of the most embarrassing examples of foisting such an illusion of democracy on an unsuspecting people.

The state, based on the modern person's understanding of a morally just society, has no *raison d'être* if it does not draw its legitimacy from the will of the people. Democracy is the only system of government that has such legitimacy. The best way forward for Bangladesh is to strive to build and strengthen democracy and concurrently pursue economic development and other goals, which can lead to a virtuous cycle of continuously improving democracy and at the same time, making sustainable progress toward achieving a prosperous and just society.

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## Fiji and Poland launch Talanoa Dialogue at COP23



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

**SALEEMUL HUQ**

**T**HE 23rd Conference of Parties (COP23) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) ended in Bonn, Germany, on Saturday morning, as negotiations ran overtime by a day. While the event was held in Germany, the official

host of COP23 was in fact Fiji, and the President of the COP was the Prime Minister of Fiji himself. This was the first time that a small island developing state had hosted a COP and this made a significant difference to the atmosphere in Bonn.

In COP21 held in France in December two years ago, the historic Paris Agreement was agreed upon committing all countries to take action on both mitigation as well as adaptation and to keep global temperature increase well below two degrees centigrade and, if possible, below 1.5 degrees. The Paris Agreement also set a timetable for having a stocktake of progress by COP24, which will be held in Poland in December next year.

This COP in Bonn was meant to start the process of developing the rule book for implementing the Paris Agreement and initiate the process for the Facilitated Dialogue due to take place in Poland next year. Thus, Fiji introduced the countries to their "Talanoa Dialogue" concept that is used by the islanders in the Pacific to arrive at decisions through consensus, not by adversarial negotiations between groups (which is typically how countries behave at the COPs) but rather by allowing everyone to have a say and reaching consensus through a participatory and inclusive process.

It was in this spirit that Fiji together with Poland launched the Talanoa Dialogue at COP23 which will continue all through the year, rather than waiting until COP24 next year, to consult not just with governments, but also with many other constituencies.

COP23 also came out with two important decisions to ensure better representation at the COPs, namely a Gender Action Plan to involve



**A mockup of Planet Earth is displayed at the Rheinaue park during the COP23 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bonn, Germany.**

PHOTO: PATRIKSTOLLARZ/AFP

more women as well as recognising local governments and indigenous peoples' groups. The inclusions of these groups will broaden the decision-making process and make it more inclusive from now on.

During the official negotiations in Bonn the most contentious issue, as always, was about finance. But this time it was about finance for compensation to the victims suffering loss and damage from climate change. Under Fiji's leadership the vulnerable countries, including Bangladesh, pushed strongly for developing innovative funding sources for loss and damage. In the end we won a partial victory with the developed countries, led by Germany, agreeing to provide insurance against loss and damage for 400 million poor people. While this is indeed to be welcomed, it will not be enough and insurance is unlikely to reach the poorest and most vulnerable people whose need is the greatest. So, this issue will continue into future COPs.

Another aspect of COP23 that everyone was curious about was what the US would do since President Trump has officially written to the

UNFCCC that the US will withdraw from the Paris Agreement (but not from the UNFCCC itself). As the rules of the Paris Agreement require a country to remain in for two more years before they are officially out, the US State Department did indeed send some relatively low-level officials to be part of the negotiations but they remained low-key. They also sent some officials from the White House in the high-level segment who held an event to try to boost the use of "clean coal". But they were booed and heckled by the audience.

On the other hand, the non-government sector from the US set up their own Climate Action Pavilion where there was a new constituency speaking every day about how the people of the US are still in the Paris Agreement even if their President wasn't. These included governors of major states including California, mayors of hundreds of cities, heads of major companies including Walmart, heads of NGOs and universities and individuals including Al Gore and Arnold Schwarzenegger, all saying that they would fulfil their obligations under

the Paris Agreement. As a result, the US is actually on course to fulfil the mitigation pledges made by President Obama in Paris despite attempts by President Trump to reverse all Obama policies.

As a result, the global leadership on tackling climate change has now moved to China, as well as many other coalitions of the willing, including many sub-national states and cities who are taking actions to implement the Paris Agreement on the ground.

This dichotomy between the official government negotiators and the non-governmental implementers was vividly illustrated in Bonn by the two separate venues where these two groups were housed. The venue for the negotiators was the official conference venue with very little natural lighting and most of the negotiations taking place behind closed doors where observers just sat around

waiting for the negotiators to emerge. The venue for NGOs and others was set up in a park where there were lots of cafes, many pavilions, booths with information, meeting rooms for side events and a stage for the Talanoa dialogues to take place amongst civil society members. This venue was buzzing with excitement, discussions, music and even dancing while the official negotiators remained locked inside windowless rooms arguing about commas and words!

In many ways this embodies the shift since we adopted the Paris Agreement, in the relative importance between the official negotiators and the actual implementers with the latter being more important than the former from now on.

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## QUOTABLE Quote



**JANE AUSTEN**

ENGLISH NOVELIST

*Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken.*

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

1 Vodka cocktail 38 Poet Angelou  
6 Worker's pay 39 Dwelling  
11 Burger topper 41 Knock  
12 Full of energy 45 Slanted edge  
13 Summer of music 46 Comic's forte  
14 Take it easy 47 Hearty dishes  
15 Cake layer 48 Overly sentimental  
17 One or more  
18 Breaking out, maybe  
22 Deceitful sort  
23 Leave work  
27 Burning  
29 Competitor  
30 Peaceful  
32 "Listen!"  
33 Temple topper  
35 Toast spread

**DOWN**

16 Nest item  
18 Weary word  
19 Existence  
20 Den  
21 City of Mexico  
24 Track shape  
25 School grade  
26 Sommer of cinema  
28 Some paints  
31 Memorable period  
34 Tales of the gods  
35 Pokes roughly  
36 Aid in crime  
37 Chess turn  
38 Fighter  
7 Saloon quaff  
8 River of Arizona  
9 Writer Hunter  
10 Hot, in a way

### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	P	O	T	S	B	A	R	B	S
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