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The Daily Star

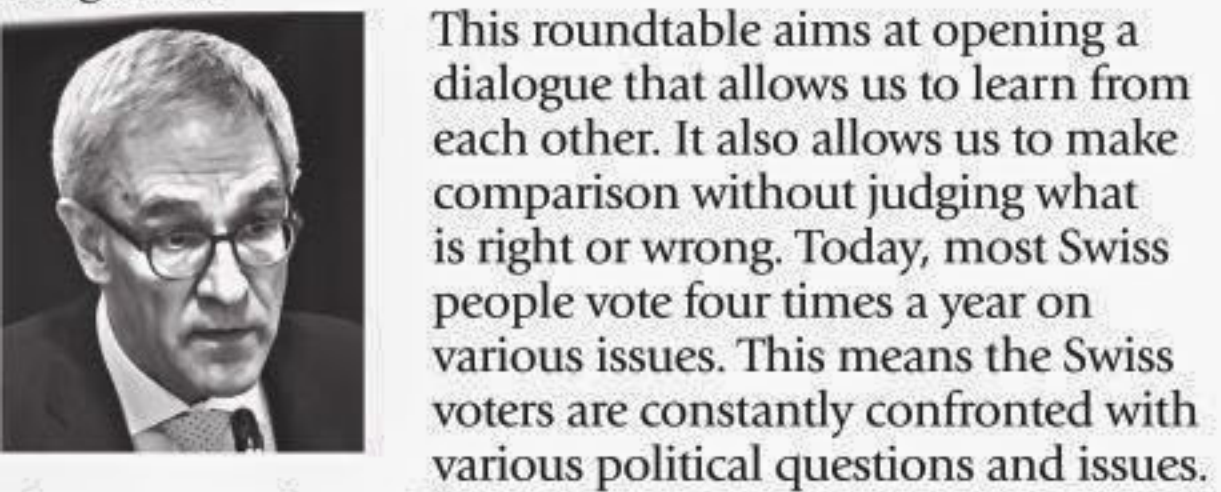
# People's participation, democracy and local governance: Features of democracy in Switzerland and Bangladesh



The Daily Star in association with the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh organised a roundtable titled "People's participation, democracy and local governance: Features of democracy in Switzerland and Bangladesh" on July 03, 2019. The objective of the roundtable was to share democratic practices and experiences of the two countries. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

**Mahfuz Anam, Editor & Publisher, The Daily Star**  
Democracy is under a lot of pressure globally. Many countries are moving in a direction that is unexpected and not conducive to democracy. So, at this moment, it is a pleasure to be able to discuss how Switzerland is not only being able to build a society of participation, but actually giving us an example of democracy as a legal instrument, as a system, and also allowing citizens to participate in the running of the country. Though there are flaws in the system, democracy remains the institution that people prefer all across the world. Few countries can claim to have perfected democracy. But as Churchill had said, "With all its flaws, democracy remains the best of all the flawed systems." As a newspaper and as a country, I believe, we have a lot to learn from Switzerland.

**René Holenstein, Ambassador, Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh**



This roundtable aims at opening a dialogue that allows us to learn from each other. It also allows us to make comparison without judging what is right or wrong. Today, most Swiss people vote four times a year on various issues. This means the Swiss voters are constantly confronted with various political questions and issues. They must inform themselves about the proposals and understand the consequences of their decisions. In other words, Swiss citizens must have their political antennae permanently extended because in Switzerland people hold considerable sway over the fate of their country. But, we also see the flipside of the coin: most people exercise their voting rights selectively, only a minority of the voters can be regarded in the strict sense of term as "exemplary voters". It is important for me to stress that democracy is above all the constant search for consensus and, in the absence of the latter, the search for best compromise possible. In Switzerland, there are many minority groups, who are involved in the political process on an equal footing, from the beginning. The Swiss system, which combines federalism and direct democracy, thus ensures that minorities have the opportunity to be heard at the institutional level, and that sense the system of direct citizen participation is also a factor of political integration and social inclusion.

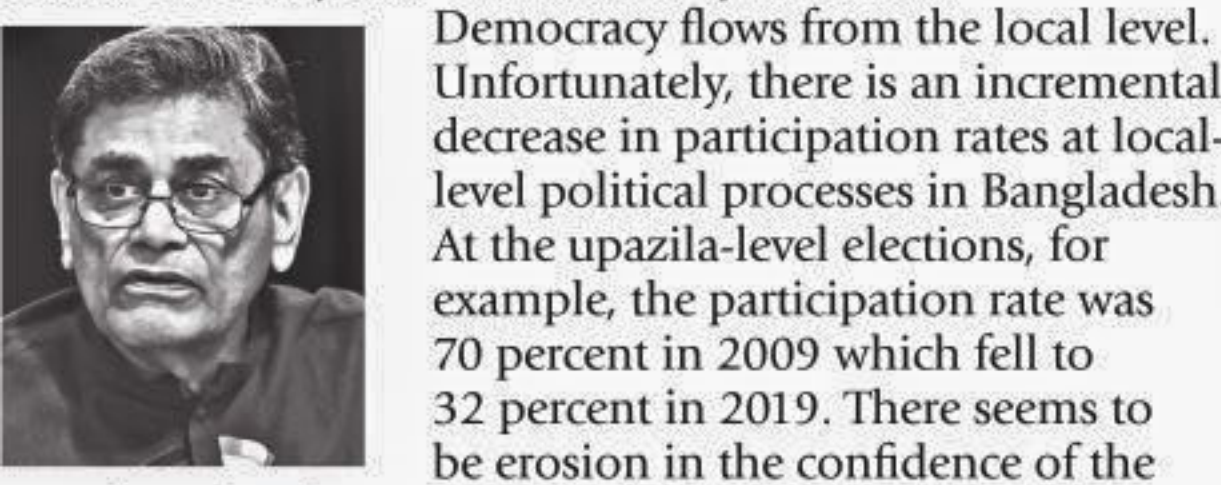
An efficient democracy allows space for protests. For example, the current youth demonstrations against global warming in Europe will certainly have an influence on the future policies regarding climate change.

I am also aware that the system of direct democracy has many limitations; the system is open to many diversified views, interpretations and expectations. It may be argued that the strong influence from the citizens might slow down the system to make decisions or be efficient. However, constant debates among the voters establish personal identity and enhance acceptance among the people who live abiding by these decisions.

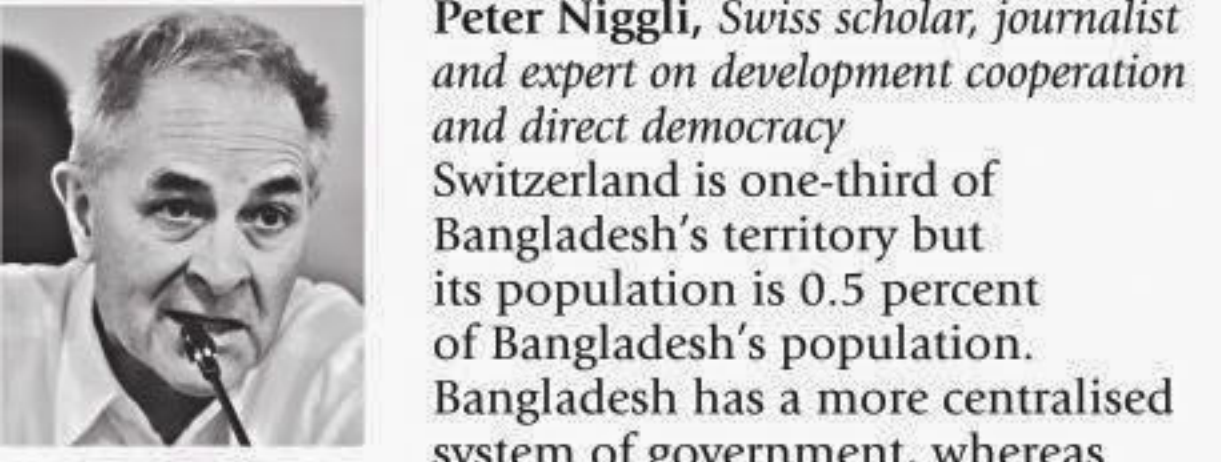
The concept of democracy is also very important in Bangladesh. It is one of the four founding principles of the country. The people of Bangladesh struggled for independence in 1971, to uphold and protect their right to self-determination, which is an important part of democracy. Despite ups and downs in a democratic journey, it is important to continue to promote the universal trends of democracy which include intrinsic values such as power-sharing, consensus-building, citizens' participation and gender equality.

As a long-standing friend and a development partner of Bangladesh, Switzerland will continue to promote human and social capital development in this country as well as the voice and rights of particularly poor and disadvantaged women and men for improving their wellbeing and equal participation in the society. The main idea of this roundtable discussion is to learn from sharing experiences with each other and not to replicate ideas or different models of democracy as context varies from state to state.

**Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan, ndc, psc, (Retd), Associate Editor, The Daily Star & moderator of the session**



Democracy flows from the local level. Unfortunately, there is an incremental decrease in participation rates at local-level political processes in Bangladesh. At the upazila-level elections, for example, the participation rate was 70 percent in 2009 which fell to 32 percent in 2019. There seems to be erosion in the confidence of the people in the election system. However, people are losing interest in election, not in democracy.



**Peter Niggli, Swiss scholar, journalist and expert on development cooperation and direct democracy**  
Switzerland is one-third of Bangladesh's territory but its population is 0.5 percent of Bangladesh's population. Bangladesh has a more centralised system of government, whereas

in Switzerland we have 26 member states called cantons, and over 2,000 municipalities. The cantons of Switzerland have their own police, education and health system.

At the national level, Switzerland has a two-chamber parliament. The Council of States (Senate) has two universally elected representatives from each canton. The National Council (House of Representatives) has 200 members. The members in the Council are elected according to the proportion of the population of their respective states. Switzerland adopted this system following model in the United States.

The national government is elected via the parliament to ensure that there is enough consideration of having people, who speak different languages and come from different cultural origins, in the decision-making process.

Municipalities and cantons elect their own executive authorities and parliaments. Every canton has its own budget. The municipalities in Switzerland raise the direct income tax and share the proceeds with the cantons. The municipalities also raise direct income tax for the federal state. However, there are economic inequalities between the cantons. Economic inequalities within or between cantons are mitigated by compensatory payments.

In case of Bangladesh, the centralised system follows a vertical system. There are divisions which are directed through decisions provided by the central government, although income is generated from all divisions. This is similar to the system in France.

A special thing about our Swiss system is that the policymaking process is resolved through the inclusive decisions taken by citizens. Constitutional amendments need double majority of citizens plus cantons. If parliaments adopt laws in their own capacity, 50,000 citizens can compel a popular vote on it, this is called a referendum.

The direct democracy system in Switzerland is very particular and considerate of human rights. There are strict laws for multinational corporations (MNCs). The MNCs need to ensure that the consumers and the employees are not exploited.

The next most important topic is: who forms the opposition? Seven parties compete for power nationally. Four are in the national government without being bound by a coalition contract. Seats in the national parliament are provided according to the percentage of votes obtained.

It is the freedom of expression and the inclusion of people from all social levels that have made it possible to practise direct democracy in Switzerland

**Professor Sadeka Halim, Dean, Faculty of Social Science, University of Dhaka**



Our socioeconomic structure is very different from that of Switzerland. I believe replication is of political model is not a good idea. We can learn from the experiences of other countries and develop our own form of political system suited to our social conditions.

The understanding of individuals about democracy and the extent to which they are practising it are very important. Many government institutions and non-government bodies are actively working for the development of the economic conditions of people. But it is important to increase awareness about one's rights and to make access to information easier. Through this people will be able to negotiate better.

Another important issue is the increase in political mobility of general people. Although people of Bangladesh are discussing politics everywhere, their political mobility is very low.

A very important issue that I would like to highlight is the fall in women's participation in the election process in Bangladesh. Between 2009 and 2019, the participation rate of women has come down by 50 percent. Women have identified socioeconomic and religious barriers as some of the major obstacles in participating in local-level political institutions.

**Dr Iftekhar Zaman, Executive Director, Transparency International Bangladesh**



Accountable governance is crucial for establishing democracy. It increases efficiency of democracy and improves relations and coordination between people and the government bodies both at national and local levels.

There are two main driving forces in democracy: the people, who are the resource and power of the country, and the government, which leases the power from the people through elections. The good news is that social accountability exists in the process at the local level in Bangladesh. However, within the given resources and capacity at the local level, the process becomes quite tenuous because political ownership by local government bodies or duty-bearers is rare.

The approach towards the process of social accountability broadly depends on two things. Firstly, the government lets people raise their voice and demand accountability. Secondly, an interconnected social and political environment is created for the people to hold the government accountable. If such approaches are not

taken, it will be difficult to develop an efficient system of accountability in Bangladesh.

Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, we are getting used to concentration of power and the monopolisation of political space by design or by default. Unlike the Swiss Parliament, the Parliament of Bangladesh is not accountable to the people. The next problem is the rise in intolerance towards criticism, resulting in a shrinking space for media freedom.

I feel that the fundamental values, for which we fought in 1971, are now being highly compromised. Politics has now become the dominant factor behind crime, corruption and violation of fundamental rights. There is an ever-expanding gap between people and politics which is seriously undermining public interests.

**Devasish Roy, Circle Chief, Chakma Circle, Chittagong Hill Tracts**



It is still very difficult for the indigenous groups or the minorities to actively participate in politics, in elections and even in carrying out NGO-related activities.

One critical issue with the regional council in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is that they cannot pass any law on their own. They need to consult with the government to pass a certain policy or law for their local community. There are many other serious issues regarding passing rules in the CHT such as the new forest policy. Problems in the Forest Act should be paid heed to and acted upon by the government. Moreover, in the name of security, many unlawful occurrences are happening in the CHT which are not a part of civil governance. The government should seriously address these issues.

In CHT there is the practice of village governance. The chief of the circle is elected. This shows how democracy is nurtured at the local level of the CHT. The indigenous people from this region do not go to village courts; they look to their circle chief for justice. Moreover, from the Chakma circle, with encouragement from the civil societies of Bangladesh, we have introduced women *karbaris*—traditional women heads—in more than 300 villages.

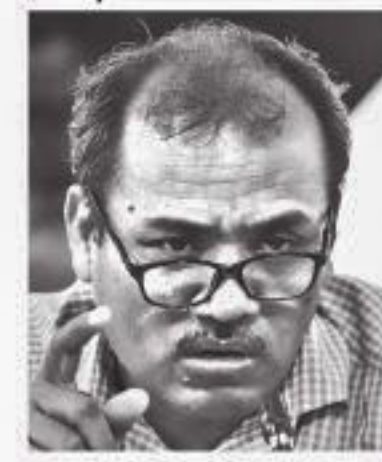
In CHT, customary law is respected. It is a part of Bangladeshi law until and unless it conflicts directly with the constitutional or customs of a certain community. But the system for the minorities in the plain lands is quite different. Their traditional governance system is not recognised by the government. Their community leaders are not accepted by the sovereign law of the country. As they are few in number compared to the majority population, they can't elect their representatives through local level elections. They are even unable to find out information about the amount of money being allocated for their development.

**Zahid Hossain, Human Rights Officer, United Nations Development Projects**



We may say that it will not be possible for Bangladesh to practise the kind of democracy adopted in Switzerland due to the differences in our context. But contextualisation should not be an excuse for not maintaining international standards. For example, in the recent Nayan Bond crossfire case, we saw that many people welcomed crossfire as a solution. But in a democratic society, extrajudicial killings can't be acceptable. It is the government's duty to educate people so that they can participate in effective decision-making processes.

**Sanjeeb Drong, General Secretary, Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum**



The government should have clear laws and regulations for ensuring participation of the minorities in the Parliament. There should be provisions for reserved seats for minorities in Parliament. Another important issue is the establishment of a minority commission.



**Shekhar Chakraborty Partha, Programme Officer, HEKS/EPER**  
A major problem is that there is no specific data available in Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) regarding the exact number of ethnic minority groups. This is resulting in the inefficient reach of assistance and recognition to the minorities.



**Sazzad Mahmud Shuvo, Senior Dialogue Associate, Communication, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), and Communication Focal Person, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh**  
The youth of our country get very little opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. In our country, we have a strong ruling party

in the Parliament, but there are very few debates carried out before the implementation of any law or policy. Even the media is being politicised, thus shrinking the space for freedom of speech and scope for the youth to voice themselves. The youth of the country are on the verge of losing their faith in democracy.

**Professor Dilara Chowdhury, Former Faculty of Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University**



I believe the beauty of democracy is in allowing space for people of different religions and ethnic backgrounds to live in harmony.

The problem with Bangladesh right now is the absence of participation of people in the political decision-making process. This is mainly because people are scared to raise their voice. There is no opposition party in the Parliament that can take the side of the people to create debates. Thus, it is important to first establish democracy in its truest form and then expect the reformations needed for societal development.

**Barrister Omar H Khan, Head of Chambers, Legal Counsel**



Democracy is a part of our lifestyle. However, the essence of freedom in democracy has lost value globally. One important thing that needs to be taken care of is the level of social tolerance. Compared to the people of Bangladesh, the Swiss people seem to be more tolerant towards others' views and opinions. I believe

that increase in our tolerance level can help in bringing democratic harmony.



**Shamsul Huda, ED - Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD)**

We need to talk about the political process besides democracy. The political process in Bangladesh has become highly corrupt. We need to replace it with a fair political system.



**Pallab Chakma, Executive Director, Kapaeng Foundation**

The minorities in the CHT need to be given room to actively participate in the council elections. Without this, people's aspirations in the hill tracts will not be reflected.



**Sheepa Hafiza, Executive Director, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK)**

The efforts of NGOs and even general people are now more skewed towards economic development. What are the elements that should be induced to ensure sustainable democracy at times like this?

**Dr Badiul Alam Majumdar, Global Vice President and Country Director, The Hunger Project**



Every nation has its own norms, but certain features of democracy are common globally. I believe they include accountable governance and fixing problems at the local level. Accountability needs to be maintained in both horizontal and vertical forms. Proper discussion between the ruling party and

opposition party in the parliament is likely to help in maintaining horizontal accountability. To ensure vertical accountability, consent of the people should be recognised through free, fair and credible elections. Fixing of problems at the local level through local institutions will ensure increased participation. Rights of the citizens should be ensured along with those of the minorities. Women's participation needs to be reframed through the rotational format. Information technology can be utilised in increasing the participation level as well. In the process of increasing people's participation, we are likely to be able to mitigate the problem of shrinking space for democracy.

**Aroma Dutta, Member of the Parliament**



The Honourable Prime Minister has clearly mentioned that there will be zero tolerance against corruption and ill-governance. There should be more dialogue to enhance the space for general people's participation. Local government should be strengthened and women's participation should be encouraged. The civil society at

present seems to be more inclined towards business. They should be more active in raising awareness among the people and encouraging their participation in the political process.