

Should development and democracy be at odds with each other?

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and respected should be a matter of right. There is also a tendency amongst many of us to cite examples of undemocratic countries as stories of economic success. In doing so, China is cited as an example where the economy has been growing fast even in an undemocratic environment. Singapore is also mentioned as another glaring example of economic success that was possible in an authoritarian system. However, the limitations of those systems are revealed. Corruption of Chinese high-level party officials and inequality of distribution are widely discussed. Worldwide, these two countries have been criticised for suppressing people's voices and freedom. While the leadership of former Singapore President Lee Kuan Yew is highly acclaimed as he transformed a poor country into a developed country only within three decades, the present-day style of state governance which is termed as democracy by Singapore, is not appreciated by many countries and leaders around the world.

Promoting the idea of democracy does not mean that the current democratic governments are perfect. However, it is the not the democratic system but the way it is exercised that has to be blamed. There are various types of democracies practiced by countries—weak democracies, strong democracies, soft democracies, limited democracy, and so forth. But such categorisation seems to be a false one. When we want to achieve development, the all-encompassing aspect of democracy is needed. It cannot be such that people are allowed to vote in the elections but cannot express their opinions on certain government policies and measures. Economic policies are formulated for the benefit of people, so it is only natural that people should have a say on them. A democratic system would allow everyone to express opinions inclusively regardless of class divisions based on power or influence. Then democracy becomes dysfunctional and economic benefits are unequally distributed. Our own experience can vouch for this. Before Bangladesh's independence in 1971 from the West Pakistan, we had

seen that, despite economic progress of the then Pakistan, the eastern part of Pakistan, which is now Bangladesh, was deprived of all benefits. The shadow of such democracy was observed in Bangladesh also in the eighties and nineties. Such democracy was dysfunctional without any accountability which benefitted those who were in power and also close to power. So, we should not get swayed by short-sighted propositions which contradict the inherent meaning of both democracy and development.

The hard-earned democracy, impressive economic and social progress of Bangladesh since its independence have to be consolidated and strengthened. The weakness in our democratic system has to be worked on through inclusive political system and people's participation. A lot more needs to be done towards fulfilling the commitment of establishing a just



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society, as enshrined in the Constitution. Unfortunately, the circle of beneficiary groups created around the political power is becoming larger and stronger day by day. Benefits of growth are being hijacked by them, leaving the larger community behind. High and wilful bank loan defaults, cheating innocent customers through malpractices in the e-commerce sector, corruption in the health sector, poor quality of education, illegal land and forest grabbing, pollution of water bodies, violence against women and reckless killing through road accidents are some of the examples that reflect how these unacceptable practices continue to remain unabated despite the high growth of the country. People's voice is either suppressed or unheard in most cases. That is why the quality of democracy matters. It is not all democracies which can offer better

outcomes for their citizens. There is no straightforward relationship between democracy and social welfare. Democratic governments have to undertake deliberate workplan on social welfare issues and distribution of benefits.

But democracy is also about getting the opportunity to take part in determining individual interests. Transparency in resource allocation and its utilisation, accountability of resource management, protection of human rights including freedom of expression—all are components of the democratic package and essential

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for inclusive development. Hence, the true meaning of democracy should lie in empowering people through enabling their participation in the electoral and development process. Freedom through free and fair democracy is a defining component of a long-lasting development process. The journeys of the highly developed and strong democratic countries vindicate this experience.

In the 21st century, the argument in favour of ignoring democracy for economic development is weak. Development by sacrificing democracy is not possible because democracy is a component of development. Both are essential pre-conditions for human welfare. Creating a dichotomy between democracy and development is misleading. They are inextricably linked with each other—one reinforcing the other.

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