

BERTELSMANN TRANSFORMATION INDEX 2024

Another indictment of Bangladesh's state of governance



Ali Riaz is a distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University, US, and a non-resident senior fellow of the Atlantic Council. His recent publications are 'Pathways of Autocratization: The Tumultuous Journey of Bangladesh Politics' (Routledge, 2024) and 'The Charade: Bangladesh's 2024 Election' (Prothoma, 2024).

ALIRIAZ

One more report on the global state of democracy delivered bad news last Tuesday. Bertelsmann Stiftung, a German research institution, publishes an index of the political and economic transformation of 137 countries every two years. Its 10th report, published on March 19, offers a global and regional picture and discusses the state of the economy, politics, and governance of selected countries. The assessment is called the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) and was first published in 2003 but became a regular publication in 2006. The 2024 report covers the period between January 2022 and December 2023. The report's assessment of the global state of democracy, as well as of South Asia and Bangladesh's governance warrants our attention.

The BTI report's overall assessment of the global state of democracy is sobering. The 2024 report classified 74 countries as autocracies, of which 25 are moderate autocracies while the remainder are hard autocracies. Bangladesh, since 2018, has been classified as a "moderate autocracy." The moderate autocracies are home to four billion people. Sixty-three countries, classified as democracies, are divided into three categories: 15 democracies in consolidation, 37 defective democracies, and 11 highly defective democracies. These countries are home to three billion people.

There are a few deeply concerning global trends that have emerged. The most important, according to the report, are "deliberate efforts to undermine the authority of oversight bodies such as the judiciary, legislature, regulatory agencies, and the media. This inclination is facilitating

the concentration of power within the executive branch and undermining the principle of separation of powers. During the period under review, it has primarily been increasingly authoritarian heads of state who have criticised efficiency shortcomings and championed a strong executive as a solution to corruption and reform backlogs." This trend is easily discernible in Bangladesh's political situation of the past decade.

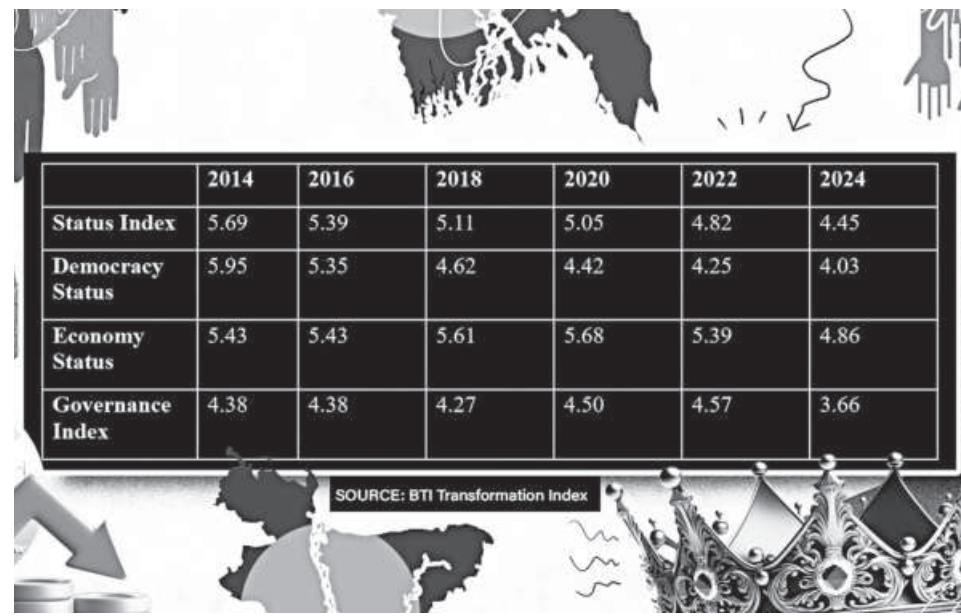
It has been noted by democracy watchers such as Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) that, for the past 15 years, the quality of elections has eroded in many countries. Once considered a tool of democratisation, elections have become an instrument to legitimise autocratic rule in countries where autocrats have risen. According to the BTI 2024 report, "in the last two years alone, elections in 25 countries were less free and fair." While this report did not include Bangladesh's 2024 election, one can recall the conclusion of the EU's election expert mission's report published on March 9: "The 2024 parliamentary election in Bangladesh did not meet some key international standards for democratic elections." This conclusion echoed the statements made by the United States and the United Kingdom immediately after the election. According to the US, "the election was not free or fair." The UK's statement said that essential elements of the democratic process, such as respect for human rights, rule of law, and due process, were not consistently met during the election period.

It is not only that the electoral process was undermined in various countries, but a few

other fundamental elements of democracy have also been emasculated. For example, according to the BTI 2024 report, "assembly and association rights in 32 states have been increasingly curtailed and the freedom of expression in 39 countries has faced tightened controls." Where does the erosion of these basic features of democracy take a country? There is an unequivocal answer to this question in the report: "This gradual

erosion of democracy can provide a pathway

for the establishment of authoritarian rule, a trend exemplified by the cases of Bangladesh, Mozambique and Türkiye."



SOURCE: BTI Transformation Index

VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

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BTI's assessment of a country's economic and political governance cumulates them by two indices: status index and governance index. The status index comprises political and economic transformation, while the governance index documents the political leadership toward democracy and a market economy. Simply put, the status index provides an overall picture while the governance index examines a more nuanced

status index and governance index at 6.46 and 7.20, respectively, on a scale between 1 and 10. While India has been classified as a flawed democracy, several aspects of democratic rights are noted to be on a downward trend. Association and assembly rights, freedom of expression, separation of powers, independent judiciary, and civil rights have seen significant erosion in the past decade under the Modi government. The worrying aspect for India, which used to claim to be the largest democracy, is the decreasing support for democracy among its citizens. The report draws on 2019/2020

survey results conducted by the Pew Research Center which showed that only 46 percent of Indian respondents indicated a preference for democracy, while 48 percent mentioned that they would prefer "a leader with a strong hand." As a March 13 Pew report showed, 67 percent of Indian respondents preferred a "strong leader" governing the country while 72 percent supported military rule. Among the countries surveyed, support for autocratic leadership was the strongest in India.

The BTI's 2024 report provides an opportunity to examine a decade-long trend of democracy and governance in Bangladesh. A clear and remarkable downward trend is documented in the data available from 2014 to 2024. Over the past decade, Bangladesh's overall status score has declined from 5.69 to 4.45. The most significant decrease is noticed in the democracy index: a staggering decline of 1.92 points, from 5.95 in 2014 to 4.03 in 2024.

For those who have been following Bangladesh's politics and governance for decades, these would not come as a surprise, as other available democracy indices have amply documented this pattern. Yet, these numbers are once again a reminder of where the country is heading. One can say that this is another indictment of the state of politics and governance in Bangladesh.

In the BTI report, Bangladesh has been referred to several times in the discussion of the global scenario as an example, including for usurpation of power by the executive branch using the parliamentary majority to "dismantle horizontal accountability"; lack of willingness and ability to engage in international cooperation; and curtailment of judicial independence following an earlier weakening of the separation of powers. A combination of these had already made the country a "moderate autocracy" by 2018. But with the engineered election of January 7, 2024, it appears to be heading towards becoming a "hard autocracy." Clearly, the BTI report is yet another sounding of the warning bell.

The ecocidal mindset of our policymakers



Mostafa Yousof is a journalist and researcher.

MOSTAFA YOUSUF

protected by various conservation status and consisting of 6,70,000 trees (of which hundreds are mother trees) and raze a belt of 45 large hills (that too by blocking 16 life-saving corridors for the Asian Elephant)? All of this ecocidal devastation was designed even while there was an alternative to avoid the damage.

When we cut down a mother tree, we kill 300 forms of life that call it home. A mature tree provides 200

kg of oxygen, enough for 10 people a year, and through photosynthesis, a mature tree can absorb 22 kg of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere aside from performing other vital roles in a complex forest ecosystem. It says volumes about the mindset of our bureaucrats when we see how adamant they are about taking over 700 acres of protected forest in Shuknachhari in Cox's Bazar, declared an ecologically critical area (ECA) by the government decades back, for building a civil service academy. They argue that there will be green areas to recoup biodiversity loss. Clearing out forestland almost 3.5 times larger than our entire parliament complex and planting a few hundred trees to offset the loss is the only defence they could come up with.

VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON



Back when I was a full-time journalist, I heard an intriguing story about a top bureaucrat who was once visiting the country's coastline, which is dotted with Zhaw trees, an essential species that protects the ever-erosive coastline of this deltaic land. The official suddenly began charging the forest staffers, "What is the use of such a tree? Why don't you plant teak along the coastline, the wood of which has a great demand in the market for luxury furniture?" Dumbfounded, one of the staffers came forward to explain the pivotal role the Zhaw tree plays as a natural shield against catastrophes.

In 1871, the British colonists introduced teak, aiming to generate revenue from the forests in the hilly region of Kaptai, using seeds from Myanmar, just 14 years after the Sepoy Mutiny against British rule. Though teak has local and global demand for the furniture industry, it inflicts damage to the soil's properties, soaking up water from the forest floor and turning it dry.

The question posed by the bureaucrat reflects not only the depth of his ignorance but also reveals the general mindset of our policymakers. Such predatory colonial views can be traced as far back as to the travelogue of Francis Buchanan, a Scottish physician hired by the then East India Company to take stock of the prospect of spice cultivation in 1798.

His highly cited book *Francis Buchanan in Southeast Bengal (1798): His Journey to Chittagong, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Noakhali, and Comilla* still stands as a glaring example of how the British ripped apart vast swathes of forestland and wildlife to facilitate the commercialisation of this region's greeneries. Buchanan's idea was that anything in the forest that couldn't be turned into

cash was extraneous, marking the manifestation of a colonial outlook of our forestlands. Buchanan singled out two bottlenecks that stood in the way of profit-mongering: dense forests and their wildlife. The forest was seen as a mere jungle; a safe home for wild predators, and hence needed to be cleared off for revenue generation. Unfortunately, Buchanan's 226-year-old proposition still takes centre stage in our development planning.

After all, if this wasn't the case, who on earth would have approved the felling of 5.2 million trees to make space for an economic zone in a Mirsarai mangrove forest, rendering 7,000 deer, along with other important species, without a habitat overnight? How else could a development project to build a 102-km railway line for tourists get the nod to traverse through three forests

Even our former environment

CROSSWORD

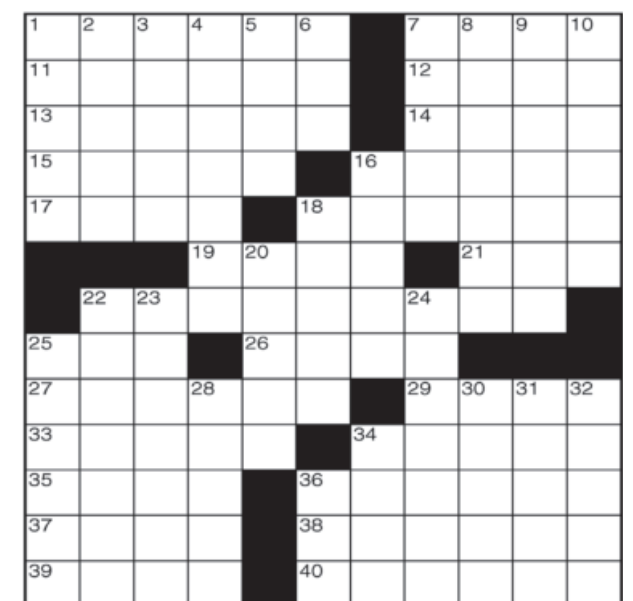
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

Across

- 1 Narrow passage
- 7 Fleet Unit
- 11 With 38 Across, New Year's start
- 12 Hunting garb, for short
- 13 Surrounded
- 14 Tire holders
- 15 Pays to play
- 16 Airport areas
- 17 Still life fruit
- 18 Skiing variety
- 19 Cruise stop
- 21 Braying beast
- 22 New Year's Eve quaff
- 25 Pigeon sound
- 26 "Dear me!"
- 27 Cry of discovery
- 29 River vessel
- 33 Impetus
- 34 Bill add-on
- 35 Tear down
- 36 Like tears
- 37 Composer Stravinsky
- 38 See 11-Across
- 39 Small change
- 40 Makes fun of

DOWN

- 1 Gown part
- 2 Binding need
- 3 Words before car or cop
- 4 Libya neighbor
- 5 Composer Charles
- 6 Hall of Famer Williams
- 7 Throw away
- 8 Port-au-Prince native
- 9 Enormous
- 10 Outlaw chasers
- 16 Gather
- 18 Dominant
- 20 Chimney output
- 22 Pluck
- 23 Distant sight
- 24 Dian Fossey subject
- 25 Comic dubbed "The Entertainer"
- 28 Tennis star Chris
- 30 Bye, in Baja
- 31 Wield a foil
- 32 Hard journeys
- 34 Track event
- 36 Lush



12-31

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

