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The Army, UN Peacekeeping Mission and Democracy in Bangladesh

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This article examines the role of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Bangladesh in pushing the army in a certain direction with regard to holding elections and supporting political parties. It analyses the reasons why the UN peacekeeping mission has such a strong influence on the Bangladesh army and assesses the implications for future political developments of such foreign involvement. It further argues that whatever the limitations and excesses of democracy, army rule is no solution, rather it is necessary to strengthen democratic institutions and let democratic processes play themselves out. In this sense, the recourse to the army to bring in democracy in Bangladesh was not the best solution to the political impasse witnessed in 2007.

During the latter part of 2006, when elections were due to be held in Bangladesh, serious disagreements surfaced between the then ruling party, which was due to hand power over to the caretaker government, and the opposition party, over the appointment of the chief adviser of the caretaker government, and of the chief of the Election Commission, as well as the necessary revision of the voting rolls. The opposition considered both these functionaries to be too closely allied with the ruling party and demanded that they should be substituted by neutral persons acceptable to both parties. As the ruling party refused any concessions on these points, the opposition staged protests and demonstrations. The resulting confrontations between the followers of the two parties, as well as between the opposition party workers and the law-enforcing agencies, sometimes violent, threatened to bring normal life and economic activities to a standstill.

Nonetheless, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was determined to hold the elections according to her predetermined schedule. The caretaker government was constituted and the president – who was an appointee of the ruling party – doubled up as the chief adviser or head of the caretaker government. It proceeded to hold the elections. On 9 December 2006, the president deployed the armed forces throughout the country in the aid of the civil administration to maintain law and order. On the 3 January 2007, the main opposition party and its allies declared that if their demands were not met they would not participate in the elections and would carry on their country-wide agitation and protests.

Under these circumstances, elections could only be held by the use of force, including the military force, to violently suppress the opposition parties, which would have tried to obstruct the holding of elections. On 10 January 2007 the army was entrusted with the duty of taking into custody, without any warrant of arrest, anyone interfering in the conduct of elections or in the process of voting. In other words, the responsibility for holding elections so as to deliver results in favour of the incumbent party was squarely put in the hands of the army.

Throughout this period, starting from the last months of 2006, diplomats of all the major world powers like the United States (US) and the European countries, including the European Union (EU), who incidentally are also among the biggest donors to Bangladesh, urged a compromise. They held many meetings both with the prime minister and the leader of the opposition, to persuade them to reach an agreement but without success. At the same time, there were expressions of concern and appeals for a

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peaceful settlement of disagreements by the Secretary General of the United Nations, as well.

However, Khaleda Zia was in no mood to submit to the pressure by the donors, who, in the pre- and post-election civil strife, had a very plausible reason to discontinue aid. Not only were they major bilateral donors; they also had a decisive influence on the multilateral organisations which are the most important sources of external assistance to Bangladesh and could thus bring economic life to a halt. It is remarkable that, in spite of Bangladesh's heavy dependence on foreign aid, she decided to ignore the direct pressure of the donor governments with an implied threat of a

possible discontinuation of aid.

It is possible to hypothesise that based on past experience, when the legitimacy or otherwise of a government that came to power through military coups did not prevent foreign powers from doing business as usual, Khaleda Zia thought that the donors would not behave any differently, specially since hers would be a civilian government, though installed through a managed election. She was confident of the mili-

tary's unconditional support since the higher echelons of the army were appointed by her.

Further, she might have reasoned that for the international community she represented a pro-western, conservative party, without any overt record of Islamic extremism or that of leftist demagoguery. After all, she was well liked by the conservative governments of the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia, who are all close friends of western democracies like the us and the European countries. She, therefore, did not believe that the donors would actually discontinue aid. At worst, in her estimation, there could be a slow-down of aid flow for a brief period. The donors would, necessarily, reconsider as they would be hard pressed to deprive a poor country like Bangladesh of aid for the long term. To "punish" the deprived masses of a poor country by the withdrawal of aid, because of the autocratic misdeeds of their rulers, has not been a very popular policy of western democracies in the past.

Moreover, Bangladesh generated enough domestic resources to sustain the urgently required current expenditures of the public sector, while in the short run, insofar as development expenditures were considered, there was an accumulation of under-utilised aid at the disposal of the government.

It is pertinent at this stage to ask why was the donor community so eager to intervene in these internal political disputes and to pressure the army to intervene to stop the political impasse and violence. Why was the political turmoil of such interest to the donors as to invite active intervention by them? There are

many countries in the world passing through such turmoils. The donors do not seem to intervene everywhere. One can hypothesise some reasons:

First, political conflicts and the resulting socio-economic instability would hamper development work in a very poor country and hence aggravate poverty. A fragile state in south Asia, with a population of more than 150 million, is not conducive to peace and stability in the region as a whole. Further, this state of affairs would jeopardise the development assistance programmes of the donors. The aid establishments of the donor countries have an institutional interest in the continuation of their aid programmes and hence in political and economic stability.

Second, an alternative but related reason is that Bangladesh lies in the arc of Islamic countries stretching from Pakistan through Malaysia to Indonesia. The Afghan-Pakistan border region may be called the epicentre of extremist Islamic ideology. It has (a) a large number of Islamic schools, endowed with ample resources from the Gulf states, many of which are known to preach an extremist ideology; as well as (b) several terrorist training centres, drawing recruits from many countries. If Bangladesh, given its close links with that region, slides into political turmoil and associated socio-economic instability, it would be vulnerable to the spread of extremist ideology and may serve as a conduit for the rise of extremist groups in south-east Asia. Already, a few such groups, prone to violence, have been located in Bangladesh and its neighbouring countries.

Third, there are Maoist groups in India adjacent to Bangladesh and armed separatist groups in the north-eastern states of India. Instability in Bangladesh, contributing to the fragility of its state machinery, is likely to enlarge the area of operation of these groups and facilitate the supply of arms and ammunitions to them. A scenario like this, with a combination of all the above elements, could likely threaten peace and stability in south and south-eastern Asia – a matter of some concern to the rest of the world, including the developed, western countries with far-flung and extensive trade and investment interests in Asia.

Intervention by UN Peacekeeping Office

Under these circumstances, the only way in which the major powers/donors could exercise effective pressure was to target where she was most vulnerable – the support of the army. The only leverage they had on the army was to threaten loss of opportunities to participate in UN peacekeeping missions, something which is highly coveted by the army in terms of both high status and considerable financial gain.

Bangladesh's participation in UN peacekeeping missions has been widely applauded at home and abroad, in the last several years. Participation in such missions not only enhanced the prestige of the Bangladesh army abroad but also helped widen the range of its experience by exposing it to different societies as well as to the practices of the armies of different countries. Moreover, it has provided a substantial addition to the income of the participating army personnel. By rotation a large number of such soldiers and officers have participated in such missions (Table 1).¹

What was the evidence that the UN peacekeeping mission office, in fact, exerted such a pressure on the government? There

Table 1: Contributions to UN Peacekeeping Missions (2009)

Country	Number of Members
(1) Pakistan	10,618
(2) Bangladesh	9,849
(3) India	8,612
(4) Nigeria	5,882
(5) Nepal	3,884
(6) Rwanda	3,585
(7) Ghana	3,412
(8) Jordan	3,231
(9) Egypt	2,902
(10) Italy	2,762
Another 107 member states of the United Nations contribute troops totalling	39,076
Grand total	93,813

Source: United Nations Peacekeeping Report, May 2009 "Ranking of Military and Police Contributions to UN Operations", http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/2009/may09_2.pdf.

were numerous newspaper reports and rumours, which were neither confirmed nor contested by the parties involved, especially the UN.² During recent debates in parliament, a few lawmakers accused the UN of having supported an unelected government by the army.³

The only published report which can be called authentic, is the statement by the then army chief in his autobiography.⁴ There he narrates two incidents: one in which important donor governments met and told him that if the army helped in the holding of elections under the then prevailing circumstances, they would ask the UN peacekeeping office to reconsider or bar the recruitment of Bangladesh army personnel in peacekeeping operations. The second incident took place subsequently on 10 January 2008, when the undersecretary general of the UN peacekeeping operations, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, conveyed the same ultimatum to the army chief, i.e., the participation of the Bangladesh army in peacekeeping operations would be jeopardised if they helped in the holding of elections under the circumstances then prevailing. These statements of the army chief have neither been denied nor confirmed by the UN peacekeepers. It should be underlined that an undersecretary general of the UN could not have said this without the explicit approval of the UN secretary general.⁵

Questions have been raised whether the UN peacekeeping operations office had the authority to exclude Bangladesh's army from its missions on the grounds of its role in domestic political developments. On the basis of what is known in the public domain it is not possible to answer this question conclusively. It is, however, known that the decision on where to send the peacekeeping forces lies with the UN General Assembly/Security Council on the recommendations of the secretary general. The size of the peacekeeping missions and resources necessary to carry them out are also approved by the General Assembly. Once the decisions are taken, it is left to the UN peacekeeping office to implement the decision by recruiting the appropriate size and composition of the peacekeeping forces from the countries which offer to contribute to such operations.

The UN peacekeeping operations office invites contribution from member countries and the decision whether to participate, and to what extent, is left to the member countries. It decides the number of forces it seeks from a country, as well as the specific skills and categories the missions require in the field. Therefore, it is conceivable that a country willing to contribute is unable to meet the requirements in terms of skill, capability, and experience of its armed forces.

Bangladesh's Contribution to Peacekeeping

Not all countries are willing to contribute. There has been a considerable expansion in the demand for forces for UN missions in the last few years and the UN has frequently faced difficulty in recruiting the required number of forces. In 2008, for example, "the gap between the approved and deployed forces was 18,000 and the deployed forces were about 77,000". The UN office indicated in November 2008 that it would approach, if confronted with the challenge of staffing, its major contributors such as Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, which had provided an increasingly large proportion of the UN peacekeepers since 1998.⁶

Therefore, in the light of the above, it would appear that such action on the part of the secretary general (and his undersecretary general) did not need the approval of the General Assembly and Security Council since they are not involved in deciding or selecting the contribution of particular member countries to the peacekeeping operation. This is a matter between the contributing country and the secretariat of the UN which is heavily dependent on a few major donor countries for the financial resources needed for such operations, and is, therefore, presumed to be subject to effective pressure from them.⁷

On receipt of the ultimatum from the UN undersecretary general, the army chief, according to his own admission, thought hard about the choices he faced. On the one hand, he could assist the government to hold the elections by the use of force and thereby lose the opportunity for the participation of the army in the UN missions. On the other, he could intervene to change the nature and the composition of the interim government and thus postpone the elections.

Participation in the UN peacekeeping missions, according to him, was an opportunity which army personnel at all levels looked forward to. It provided them substantial additional income which was essential to supplement their meagre pay. The loss of this career opportunity was, in his opinion, likely to create great dissatisfaction among the rank and file, so much so as to endanger the discipline of the armed forces, as it happened during the latter part of 1975. Thus, this career opportunity was essential for sustaining the state of morale and incentive for the armed forces. In view of all these considerations, the army chief decided that he had no alternative but to act.⁸

From the account of the army chief it is not clear whether the donors specified the form of intervention. As he narrates, there were two alternative ways in which he could have intervened. One was to abrogate the constitution and declare martial law, as was done in 1975 and again in 1982, and establish a full-fledged military government. Alternatively, the army could act within the formal confines of the constitution and could convince/persuade the president to declare, under his own authority, an emergency. A government composed of civilian members, chosen by the army, would be formed to run the administration with the help and backing of the army, so that the army would remain the ultimate source of power and decision-making. In this scenario, the army would not visibly be in-charge of running the day to day administration. Its declared objective would remain the holding of new elections after the shortest interval and to restore parliamentary democratic processes. It was rumoured that the donors opposed the abrogation of the constitution and the declaration of martial law, even though there were factions within the army which preferred this alternative. However, the autobiography of the army chief does not put any light on this issue. Whatever the reason, either disagreements within the army or the opposition of donors to such a course, the indirect route was chosen.

The army appointed an interim civilian government which was to hold elections under its supervision, following changes in the Election Commission and in electoral rules and regulations, as well as the preparation of new voter rolls.

The Peacekeeping Lever Inside the Army

In the light of the above analysis, it may be relevant to ask whether the total compensation packages to the army personnel are indeed inadequate to recruit and maintain a contented and motivated army and whether, therefore, the only recourse, as argued by the army chief, is the access to additional income provided by peacekeeping operations. In this context, a few questions may be asked. What was the state of motivation and morale of the army till the late 1980s when there was no participation in peacekeeping missions?⁹ Was the Bangladesh army underpaid and deprived in those days, and hence, disgruntled and unhappy? Or was it that they were quite contented then but, later on, having once enjoyed the new opportunities of additional income through the UN missions, they considered it as a part of their expected income? Was it, thus, a matter of heightened expectations rather than a necessary or essential incentive? Therefore, on the face of it, it was most unlikely to be such a critical factor for keeping the army happy and contented.

At the same time, there are other poor countries where the armed forces do not participate in the UN peacekeeping missions or, even if they do, their participation is very limited. It will be interesting to examine how are they able to devise an incentive structure that nurtures a contented army with adequate morale to serve as a fighting force.

To argue that the members of the armed forces in Bangladesh receive a total compensation package which is lower than that received by the armed forces in other countries is not relevant. This argument applies across the board for all public services in Bangladesh. The compensation packages of the members of the public administration, both military and civil, depend on the level of income of a country and resources available to the government to pay for the entire range of public expenditures.

In this context, one may consider whether the financial rewards provided to the armed forces relative to the rest of the public services/administration are lower or higher in Bangladesh than in other countries, developing or developed. How does their compensation package compare with that of members of the civil administration or other law-enforcing agencies and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR)?¹⁰ In fact, it is widely assumed by the cognoscenti that their total compensation packages – including access to health, education, housing, and other benefits such as commissary privileges for purchases of consumables and other household goods – are significantly higher than those of the officers in the civil administration at various levels. A full description of the the army's total compensation package, including benefits, cash and kind, is not readily available in the public domain.¹¹

It has been suggested that a comparison of the financial rewards of the armed forces with the civil administration is not strictly appropriate because, unlike civilian officers, the armed forces have no opportunity to supplement their incomes through corruption. It could be counter-argued that the procurement of supplies, including the purchase of equipments and arms, in the defence services is not immune from corruption. In fact, Transparency International, in its worldwide study, found that defence purchases are subject to very high degrees of corruption, because these purchases are highly opaque and non-transparent, the

defence market is not competitive and they are a matter of bilateral deals between governments or between governments and giant defence contractors. However, it is likely that beneficiaries of any such corruption in defence procurements are mainly the upper ranks of the armed forces, whereas the benefits of corruption in the civil administration are believed to be widely prevalent at all levels.

The fact that participation in peacekeeping missions provides opportunities of financial rewards which are not available to other branches of the public services (except to some extent to the police officers) has been a subject of envy and resentment on the part of other public services, including the other defence-related services. It was widely publicised at the time of the recent mutiny in the BDR that one of their grievances was that they did not get to participate in UN peacekeeping missions, even though they were capable of taking part in them.

Above all, it cannot be assumed that the UN peacekeeping missions would be available on a regular basis for all the years to come. What would happen if, in future, the opportunities for participating in peacekeeping missions are reduced or eliminated for reasons unrelated to developments in Bangladesh?

In 2009, for example, about 10,000 members of the army were employed in such missions. This is almost 7% of the total armed forces, if we estimate the total number of army personnel at about 1,50,000. This would not be the case, for example, of Pakistan or India which had sent a similar number of army personnel to UN peacekeeping missions, since they both have much larger armies than Bangladesh.¹²

After all to have a large percentage of the armed forces engaged in peacekeeping missions implies that effectively the size of the operational forces at a given moment of time is less than its nominal strength and to that extent therefore the defence needs of the country are uncovered. Alternatively, it could also imply that the size of the army is larger than what is needed for defence.

Under the circumstances, if it is really considered that the total compensation packages is not adequate for the maintenance of a well-motivated army, then the matter should be treated in a comprehensive and systematic manner.

If the compensation package for army personnel has to be increased, then either total defence expenditures have to be increased or the size of the army has to be reduced to keep defence expenditures unchanged. The appropriate size of the army has to be determined in the light of a proper evaluation of the defence needs of the country as well as its resources. In turn, the appropriate size of an army depends on such considerations as the nature of the external threat, the type of operations it is likely to be involved, as well as the nature and strength of the countries against which it has to defend itself. The security needs of the country also include the ability to guard against and prevent the possibility of internal subversion by extremist groups – often heavily armed – a rising phenomenon in recent times. There are various ways in which the variety of security needs can be met with implications for the size and composition of the armed forces. An appropriate assessment of security needs is vital but ultimately it is a political decision, because it involves alternative use of scarce resources available to the government.

Implications for Domestic Politics

If the UN peacekeeping missions are considered so vital for the army and if the donors financing such missions can decide their participation, it can be argued that the latter can exert influence on the army, any time if they so decide to intervene in shaping the political developments inside Bangladesh. They can determine not only the timing of interventions by the army but also the nature and duration of such interventions.¹³

What are the implications of such interventions by the UN Peacekeeping Operations Office, apparently itself a proxy for the donors financing such operations, on domestic political developments? Does the recent example open the way to future interventions which are not necessarily in the interest of the country or desired by the population in general, but are dictated by the geopolitical or strategic interests of the major powers?

It may be argued that the threat of suspension of participation in UN missions can be used only under very special circumstances. First, there has to be an agreement among the principal donors – currently the US and member states of the EU – as to the need for such intervention. Second, such an intervention needs to find wide acceptance within the public. There was strong public support in Bangladesh for the restoration of law and order as a prelude to free, fair and peaceful elections with the participation of all political parties. These were not very common or usual circumstances. In any case, it is a debatable question, whether it is desirable to have the army, with a monopoly of control over the use of force, to be exposed to such strong, even irresistible, pressure from powerful donor countries to intervene in domestic political developments.

In the particular case being discussed, army intervention, fortunately, did soon come to an end and parliamentary democracy, with warts and all, was restored within a period of two years. However, there was a growing public opinion that the duration of the army-backed government was too long and, till the end, there was a great deal of speculation about whether and when the elections would be held. This was because, soon after it took over power, it appeared that the army had a bigger agenda than to merely hold fair and free elections. They seemed to have the objective of changing the political landscape by engineering a change in the leadership of the two political parties as well as by reforms in their internal governance. They also encouraged formation of new political parties, which, however, did not materialise. Gradually, other related items were added to the agenda of military backed rule – such as the reform of the judiciary, elected local governments with wide administrative and financial powers and a large variety of institutional reforms. A large-scale anti-corruption drive was undertaken to prosecute corrupt politicians and associated bureaucrats. However, the anti-corruption drive was perceived to have been carried out in many cases without regard to the due processes of law and soon this drive petered out.

The sustainability of long-run political and administrative reforms undertaken by the interim government was questioned and seen as a means to extend its duration. There were also reports of abuse of powers, if not outright corruption, among lower and mid-level army officers who seemed to wield considerable power over civil administrations, especially in the districts. This was no surprise. As happens all over the world, when the military

gets involved in political decision-making and civil administration, they tend to acquire all the vices endemic in the political culture and traditions of that country. In the meanwhile, the world food crisis, aggravated by shortfalls in domestic food production, rising food prices and overall inflationary pressure in the economy, reflected adversely on the performance, as well as, the legitimacy of the army-backed interim government. Popular support for the army-backed interim government, evident in early 2007, began to erode by 2008.

All these developments tended to alienate and disillusion the public as well as question the legitimacy of the army. There were indications that opinions within the army were not quite unified about the duration and purpose of their regime. A few actions taken in the early days were soon reversed. Reports circulated that hardliners within the army wanted to continue in power for a longer period, while others preferred to hold free and fair elections within a short period of time and restore political power to the winners. The donors, who originally urged and supported army intervention for cancelling the highly controversial elections, started to exert pressure – through public expressions and private meetings – urging the military backed government to hold elections and restore democracy as early as possible. However, it is conceivable that the donors, having once urged the army to intervene in the political process, may have continued to support a longer period of army-backed rule. But the evolving situation, both economic and political, was fraught with uncertainty. In the end, those factions within the army who favoured withdrawal, as well as the revised strategy of the donors, won the day.¹⁴

Bangladesh is now more or less back where it was before the beginning of the crisis, excepting that free and fair elections were held on the basis of a reliable voters' list. The political clock has been reset where as it was in 2006. The two years of interregnum produced no net gain insofar as a democratic political evolution was concerned. A consensual political process, in which political parties compete and do not confront each other and in which “the winner does not take all”, has not emerged. There appears to be no qualitative change in the political process. This experience confirms the viewpoint that army interventions rarely succeed in redesigning the political landscape and in establishing the requisite rules of democratic governance.

Alternative Scenarios

It is worth considering whether, in reaction to the threat of non-participation in UN peacekeeping missions, the army leadership could have avoided the effective takeover of civilian government. It is possible to postulate an alternative scenario where the army decides to retain complete neutrality in disputes between political parties. During the latter part of 2006, when negotiations were underway among the political parties, the army could have made it clear that it was not their role to intervene in political disputes – neither to arbitrate between the political parties nor intervene on behalf of one against the other. The leadership of the army should have approached Khaleda Zia, the then prime minister, and conveyed to her that she could not depend on them to facilitate elections by suppressing the opposition parties. If Khaleda Zia would have been convinced that the army, under no

circumstance, would intervene on her behalf, it was most likely that she would have compromised with her political opponents and come to a mutually acceptable arrangement. She would not have been able to suppress the opposition parties and hold elections with the help of the police alone. It was likely that both the parties would have mobilised their supporters and brought large crowds out in the streets, perhaps with the possibility of their turning violent, but they would have matched each other. There would have been street fights but without conclusive results. Khaleda Zia would have been left with no choice but to compromise. If the army leadership was united in its resolve not to intervene on her behalf, there would have been no elections without a compromise with the opposition parties. There would have been no need for the UN peacekeeping office to intervene and to put strong pressure on the army not to facilitate the elections scheduled for January 2007.

Is this scenario realistic or is it too optimistic? An alternative scenario could be that even if the army remained neutral and did not intervene, the president – an appointee of the then government – could have proceeded to hold elections with the help of the workers/supporters of the government, who were not totally without access to arms and, in any case, were likely to be better armed than the opposition party workers and supporters. In the extreme case, it is conceivable that elections could have been held without the participation of the opposition and, in their aftermath, there would have been violent clashes between the two parties. Clashes between the political parties might have continued unabated. In any case, normal economic activities would have been seriously hampered and the donors would be unlikely to continue business as usual under these highly unstable conditions.

Under such circumstances, it would have been likely that there would have been mounting pressure for a political compromise, including the holding of new elections with the participation of both the parties. In the meantime, however, it is most likely that the country would have suffered from the disruption of normal life and of economic activities, possibly including loss of life. There continue to be differences of opinion in the country on the relative likelihood of these alternative scenarios.

Why did the army decide not to remain neutral? This was probably for two distinct reasons. Either because there were divisions within the top leadership of the army regarding support for the incumbent government's decision to hold elections, or because there was consensus within the army leadership that army rule was preferable in the circumstances. The pressures by the UN tilted the balance in favour of those who were not willing to support Khaleda Zia's untenable elections and were also eager to intervene. There was no support for complete neutrality within the army. If there was unity in the army in favour of and a commitment to neutrality, there would have been no room for the UN and other foreign intervention.

The opposition Awami League accepted army intervention because Khaleda Zia's compromised elections were cancelled and a promise was made by the army about new elections, with a new voters' list to be established by a new Election Commission. The Awami League, however, wanted the army to withdraw from power, after holding free and fair elections, leaving the reigns of

the government with the winners. This has not been the way that army interventions have ended, in the past, in Bangladesh or anywhere else. Usually, once the army intervenes in the political process, they tend to continue in power. Bangladesh did eventually escape this fate, as explained earlier, due to a set of factors which included donor pressure, deteriorating economic circumstances as well as divisions within the army. Despite some apprehensions, army intervention did not last more than two years. The army did agree to surrender power to the winning party in the elections. But, in the final analysis, the principle of army intervention in politics remained unchanged and unchallenged. The principle of its complete neutrality in political disputes was not established.

Tradition of Army Dependancy Politics

The tradition of the Bangladesh army during the past three decades had been that it has lost no opportunity to engage in political manoeuvring, either directly or indirectly. It somehow always felt that it had the responsibility to take hold of the errant politicians and set them right in the way they seemed fit. Even though the army establishment retreated from an overt political role since 1991, it has not remained a neutral or uninterested observer of the political scene. Habits built over a decade and a half (1975-91) could not be so easily broken. Having exercised unrivalled, untrammelled, power for such a long period, they felt they had the ultimate authority to supersede civilian governments whenever, in their opinion, the affairs of the state went astray, specially since they had developed a very low opinion of politicians in general.

The politicians, on their part, did not learn the rules of democratic politics to settle disputes – negotiation, persuasion and compromise by a process of give and take – in order to reach a working consensus. For most of the period since 1947, when Bangladesh was part of Pakistan, there have been military governments. Also, after a short interregnum of democratic politics in the unstable years in the immediate post-independence period, Bangladesh went through a long period (1975-91) when the military ruled the country with the cooperation of civil servants. For the most part, there was the facade of a powerless parliament, consisting of an assortment of politicians often grouped into parties, elected through “managed” elections, playing a secondary, supportive role to the military ruler, to provide him with an aura of legitimacy.

Looking back to the restoration of democratic politics in 1991, politicians had a window of opportunity to learn the basic “rules of the game” for parliamentary democracy. But it was not to be. The policy of “give and take” or compromise was not followed; it was the principle of “winner takes all” that obtained, making confrontation between political parties the norm. The period for learning the principles of democratic politics was too short and it was interrupted. Moreover, there was not much democracy inside the political parties themselves, which were run by strong leaders who enjoyed great popularity among the masses. They commanded unquestioned allegiance of the rank and file of their respective parties across the country and consequently wielded considerable powers. Local politicians or aspiring parliamentarians in each party, therefore, focused all their energies on gaining the support of their respective party leaders rather than building up independent popular support in their own constituencies. The result was that whoever

succeeded in receiving the blessings and support of their party's sole leader won the support of the party workers at the grass roots.

The two major political parties that occupied centre stage in the post-1991 period started to vie with each other to keep the army happy and favourably disposed towards them. When in power, they made generous allocation of resources and privileges to the army, including sanctioning a disproportionate numbers of high-level positions – brigadiers and generals – in relation to the size of the army. Thus, they competed to win the loyalty, if not explicit support, of the army in their search for political power. In this competition for army support, one party, started by a general-turned politician, was perceived to have a close relationship, since the mid-1970s, with the rank and file of the army. For this party it was a matter of sustaining and strengthening its historically close relationship. The other political party, whose leader was assassinated by an army coup in 1975, started with an initial disadvantage, in the post-1991 period, but worked hard to neutralise mutual mistrust and to repair their uneasy relationship. It faced a difficult task to gain the confidence of the army in view of this controversial historical legacy.

When in power, however, each party sought to make appointments in the top leadership of the army which they deemed to be sympathetic towards them. In the process, they encouraged factionalism within the army, an unwholesome feature which militated against its professionalism. Accordingly, the relationship of the army with the government of the day often seemed to depend on how or which direction the top leadership of the army tilted and on the degree of control that the army leadership exercised over the rank and file. In short, it continued and strengthened the politicisation of the army.

Way Out of This Trap?

There was no consensus among the political parties that under no circumstances – no matter how extreme the disagreements amongst them – would they seek army intervention or help. They did not seem to recognise that once the army intervened to keep a political party in power, the party necessarily surrendered a part of its authority and power to the army.

In the absence of a consensus – both among the political parties and the army – that the military should have no role to play in the domain of politics, Bangladesh is caught in the trap of periodic military interventions in the political process, on the one hand, and of weak elected governments, on the other.

How to get out of this trap? There is an additional complicating factor in the process of political development. A view prevalent among large, if not all, sections of Bangladesh civil society, specially professionals and retired civil officials of all stripes and levels, that the solution to the misgovernance by the politicians – inefficient policies, abuse of power, corruption – is military rule.¹⁵ In Bangladesh, many of these people have participated in policymaking roles in army governments, increasing their comfort levels with military rule.

Two possible explanations have been offered for this. One is that military governments are considered by professionals to be more stable, efficient and less dishonest than civilian rule in democracies. The civilian governments have often been unstable

because of shifting coalitions between multiple political parties or because of confrontational manoeuvring between the two main dominant parties. In contrast, once development-oriented policies are accepted by an autocratic military government, they can be implemented expeditiously and effectively, with less hindrance from special interest groups, than would be possible under a democratically elected civilian government based on a coalition of parties. The military government does not need to accommodate multiplicity of interest groups or competing points of view. In a democratic process, divergent viewpoints need to reach a compromise or consensus and governments often need to elicit wide public support for proposed measures. The process of policy formulation and its implementation in a democratic regime is thus considered clumsy, cumbersome, and time-consuming and is full of uncertainties. In this line of reasoning, socio-economic development gets higher priority than the evolution of a participatory and accountable democratic society. In this view, in poor countries, democracy can wait but development cannot.

The example of rapid development in the east Asian countries under autocratic regimes is often cited in this context. But there were special historical circumstances – the threat of internal subversion posed by communism and/or external aggression loomed very large in these countries – which provided their authoritarian regimes incentives to become development-oriented. They had an implicit bargain with the people, in which in order to retain their legitimacy these regimes focused on delivering economic growth in lieu of political freedom.¹⁶

The additional reason why many civil society members are in favour of a military government is that it is much easier for the professionals and experts to attain positions of decision-making power and authority in a such a dispensation. In civilian governments, they need to go through the process of gaining acceptance by the political parties and having to compete and struggle to rise through the ranks to the positions of prominence or authority. This is a risky and uncertain path and requires high human skills, such as the ability to persuade, negotiate and lead, as well as to forge compromises between conflicting or opposing viewpoints or groups. These are qualities which, often, are not possessed by technical experts.

It is not necessary that military rulers would be development-oriented. They often turn out to be corrupt. They often divert national resources towards the distribution of favours and privileges to members of the armed forces especially the higher echelons in the army, to retain their support and remain in power. Also, brute force over the civilian population does not usually sustain them in power for any length of time. They need to have at least acquiescence, if not the support, of the people. Therefore, they tend to co-opt, by the misuse of resources and patronage, the powerful sectors of the society comprised largely of civil servants, commercial and industrial magnates and other important elements of the elite.

History is replete with examples where the authoritarian political regimes have not been sustained in the long run in the absence of popular support and legitimacy. Frequently, one authoritarian regime is replaced by another which merely adds to the larger instability. There are often rifts and competition within

the military establishment itself over power-sharing. When the military regimes collapse, often the economic and social gains obtained under their reign are lost. Their end is marked by economic decline.

In fact, the most important shortcoming of an authoritarian regime is the absence of a process for the peaceful transfer of power through an orderly method of succession. This absence creates unpredictability. The transition in Bangladesh from the first military government of Zia-ur Rahman to the next took place in 1981 through a procession of coups and counter-coups. But the transition from the next military-backed government to a democratic one took place in 1991 after weeks of mass protests and demonstrations but without much bloodshed, primarily because the army declined to put down popular protests. There are few examples where authoritarian regimes are succeeded peacefully by democratic governments without going through a period of instability and without losing the past gains in development.

More Democracy as an Answer to Bad Democracy

Experience all over the world is a stark reminder that there are no short cuts to representative and accountable government, except through a messy, sometimes confusing or rambling, process of political evolution. It is a well known dictum that democracy is not the best form of government but the alternatives to democracy are much worse. A certain amount of political confrontations, sometimes not perfectly peaceful, between opposing political forces cannot be avoided in immature democracies. The learning process in the evolution of democracy is tumultuous and may be long depending on the circumstances of each country.

Bangladesh cannot escape the fate of many young democracies going through a gradual, often stop and go, process of establishing the rule of law, independent judiciary, free media and effective government. The path would not be smooth but bumpy, often marked by instability and setbacks. The objective

should be to keep the degree of instability within limits through compromises and alliances. Any attempt to interrupt the process does not help. As we have seen in the last 30 years or so, after every military intervention we have to relearn or start over again to learn or build up the rules of the game of a democratic society.

As Bangladesh looks to the future, following the recent democratic restoration, the various sections of civil society must seek to analyse the past developments and draw lessons which should be widely debated. Civil society members have to re-examine their preconceptions. They need to be united in the conviction that the response to flawed democracy is not less but more democracy. Constant vigilance in the price of liberty. By a systematic public educational campaign by all sections of civil society, there must be a concerted effort to generate strong public opinion against periodic military interventions in politics, no matter what the state of disputes among politicians.

While Bangladesh continues to go through a process of democratic evolution, there must be a concerted effort to aggressively expand education; a more efficient and equitable education than at present to raise awareness about the importance of participatory decision-making. As economic development proceeds, the middle class is expected to expand. A large and educated middle class is the sine qua non of democratic politics. A large middle class cannot easily be co-opted by an autocratic regime. The resources necessary to co-opt a large middle class through a system of patronage distribution by an army-backed autocratic regime are not available in Bangladesh. A wide participatory democratic process is necessary to accommodate the divergent viewpoints of a large middle class and their desire for participation in the political and economic decision-making process.¹⁷

Also, it is worth examining whether certain features, which have been incorporated in the constitution of Bangladesh, need to be modified. There is a growing feeling among many, knowledgeable people that such a re-examination is necessary. To provide one example, it is argued that a concentration of power in

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the hands of a prime minister may unduly limit the power of the cabinet and parliament. We seem to have ended up converting a de jure parliamentary system into a de facto presidential system, without the safeguards or advantages of either. This is especially so in view of the lack of adequate participatory processes and procedures or checks-and-balances in the internal governance of political parties themselves. The powers of a president in a presidential system are constrained in a system of checks and balances, like an independently elected parliament and an independent judiciary. In a parliamentary system, it is arguable, that the prime minister, in control of the political party with a majority in the parliament, can govern like an absolute ruler. Also, it may be necessary to examine whether the Bangladesh president should not be elected on the basis of a consensus between all political parties rather than being a nominee of the majority party in parliament, and hence subservient to the prime minister. Similarly, the local elected government institutions have historically been a major source of political pluralism since they are often independent of central government control, and it is not necessary that they would belong to the same party. Further,

decentralisation of political power in local government allows people's wider participation in governance and thus makes local government more responsive.

These and other similar issues can be examined by a constitutional commission, to be established consisting of selected experts and members of civil society. To argue that irrespective of the system, constitutional arrangements can be subverted by politicians when they do not have convictions in the democratic process, is a gross exaggeration. The constitutional arrangements and rules are not a sufficient but necessary condition. The theory and practice of organisation – both political and administrative – suggests that they do have a role in modifying and changing behaviour. There is no perfect answer and experimentation may be necessary. While various reform proposals have been discussed in Bangladesh in the past, there is no pressure to examine them in a serious way. This is a challenge, as well as opportunity, for the wider civil society, provided they have the necessary and firm convictions about the need for such reforms and are eager to play an active and enthusiastic role to mobilise public opinion for this purpose.

NOTES

- 1 Bangladesh has so far participated in 45 of the 63 peacekeeping missions of the UN, which include 30 completed ones. So far 76,000 peacekeepers from Bangladesh have completed their UN missions. Bangladesh has developed a system for training and preparing the forces for these UN missions. UN training modules are built into the unit and formation training programmes by the Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operations (BIPSOT). A contingent is mobilised 90 days before the scheduled deployment in a mission, in order to provide consolidated training focusing on the mission requirement and to prepare it logistically. This has helped to maintain a high standard of professionalism and commitment. Hopefully it also added to the foreign exchange earnings of the country insofar as (a) the mission participants remitted some part of the income home, and (b) the government received the overhead charges from the UN on amount of the services provided by Bangladesh. Not much is known in the public domain about the quantitative magnitude of the Bangladesh's foreign exchange earnings.
- 2 The range of wild rumours varied from the UN asking the army leadership to withdraw support from the government to the UN urging it to install a military government through a coup.
- 3 *The Daily Star*, 15 September 2009.
- 4 M U Ahmed, *Shantir Shapne, Shamayer Sriticharan* (Bengali), 2009, Dhaka, pp 331-39.
- 5 As mentioned earlier, the UN Secretary General himself appealed in the latter part of 2006 for a peaceful settlement of the political stalemate in Bangladesh.
- 6 There are a limited number of countries that provide troops and police with needed capability to meet current needs, and some potential contributors may be unwilling to provide forces for a new operation due to such political factors as their own national security and the environmental and security situation in the host country. ... the difficulty of obtaining needed personnel and resources has had an impact on the abilities of ongoing operation to fully execute their mandates... It is a consistent case of demand exceeding supply of peacekeeping forces. The three countries which seem to be leaders in both having the ability and the willingness to participate are Bangladesh,

India, and Pakistan. United States Government Accountability Office, UN Peacekeeping Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 2008, pp 22-24.

- 7 It is to be noted that the most important donors of the peacekeeping operation were the United States, the European countries, and Japan. In 2003, the list of major financiers on the basis of their assessed contributions decided by the UN General Assembly was as follows: United States (approximately 27%), Japan (19.5%), the Netherlands (17%), Germany (8.7%), France (7.3%), UK (7.4%), Italy (4.9%), Canada (2.8%), and Sweden (2.0%). Significantly, all are donors to Bangladesh. (United Nations General Assembly, 58th Session, Implementation of General Assembly Resolution 55/235 and 55/236. Report of the Secretary General, 17 December 2003). The meeting in September 2009 at the UN, presided over by the United States, to which the heads of governments of 10 leading contributors (including Bangladesh) were invited to discuss their contributions to UN peacekeeping forces has demonstrated the urgency of "excess demand" for such forces.
- 8 He describes in his book how he strove within the limits of the army's resources to provide various extra facilities and perks for the army such as several high quality guest/rest houses for their rest and recreation, in very beautiful and scenic locations across the country, as well as generous facilities in the golf club in Dhaka cantonment, etc. These were all intended to keep the army happy and its morale high.
- 9 The Bangladesh Army started participating in peacekeeping missions only in 1988 (*The Daily Star*; 25 September 2009).
- 10 Bangladesh Rifles, a border security force.
- 11 In this context, it needs to be mentioned that a large number of enterprises, commercial and industrial, are owned by the Bangladesh army as an institution. It is not known how and to what extent that the members of the armed forces participate in the ownership of these enterprises, and how and to what extent they benefit directly or indirectly from the income and profits of these.
- 12 Since 1988, Bangladesh had contributed nearly 82,966 peacekeeping forces in total over this whole period (*The Daily Star*, 25 September 2009).
- 13 There were examples in the past where the major powers have encouraged or engineered army

interventions in developing countries to destabilise or dislodge civil governments which they disliked. But in those cases, usually the armed forces of the particular country had close relations with the defence forces of one or two major powers.

- 14 Usually in the past, even though the promise of an early election to restore a democratic government was always made, army rule (direct/indirect) continued for a long time. It happened in Bangladesh between 1975 and 1982.
- 15 In the post-war period, military governments in many developing countries of east Asia, Latin America and Africa have often been actively supported by the intellectuals and professionals.
- 16 Michael Schuman, *The Miracle: The Epic Story of Asia's Quest for Wealth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).
- 17 Democracy is conditional upon a large, educated, and articulate middle class – accustomed to thinking for themselves – which itself depends on economic growth. Developments bring structural change in the economy involving technical change and industrialisation moving labour force into occupations that require independent thinking, initiative and judgment on the job; it makes people more articulate; development transforms people's values and motivations, makes them desire free choice and participation in decisions affecting their lives. They are better equipped to intervene in politics. Among the countries that democratised during 1970 and 1990, democracy survived in every country that made the transition when it was at the income level of Argentina of today (1990s) or higher. Among the countries that made the transition when they were below that level democracy had an average life expectancy of only eight years (Inglehart and Wetzell, "How Development Leads to Democracy – What We Know About Modernisation", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 88, No 2, March/April 2009). India, as a low-income country, is an exception to this generalisation. It started the process of democratic transition right after independence, and continued uninterrupted for the next 60 years or so. India inherited in 1947 vibrant political parties which had started in late 19th century in British India and gained some experience in limited self-government during the colonial period. The transition is not yet complete. For the exceptional factors which have characterised the evolution of the democratic process in India, see Ramchandra Guha (2007) *India After: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (New Delhi: Harper Collins).