

The Daily Star

Published: Saturday, November 2, 2013

Violence and order in natural state

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IT was hoped that Bangladesh's transition towards democracy in the 1990s would help the country develop its key democratic institutions, eventually consolidating its democracy and improving governance structure. However, such expectations have faded away not only in Bangladesh, but also in many promising democracies. The rise of democratic wave in the 1990s has turned into 'illiberal democracy.' Democracy and free and fair elections have not gone hand in hand with constitutional liberalism, rule of law and basic human rights.

The State of Governance in Bangladesh 2010-11 report of the Institute of Governance Studies (IGS) argues that Bangladesh's democratic transition is incomplete and its democracy is far from being consolidated. In this light, it is hardly surprising that the

country's democracy now faces a transitional crisis.

Unable to provide an institutional solution, Bangladesh's current political crisis has put the country at severe risk. Nevertheless, the ongoing institutional crisis or political violence is not new to Bangladesh. In the past, the nation had faced similar crises and also found a way out, albeit at the cost of violence or intervention.

This forces us to think as to why Bangladesh does not have a mature democracy. Why has it failed to develop a political and social order controlling violence? To find answers to these questions, history could be a useful guide.

Nobel laureate Douglas North and his co-authors distinguished three general social orders: the foraging order (the primitive state), the natural state (limited access order) and the open access order, in their influential book titled 'Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History.' The book shows that the majority of world's population (about 85% people and 175 countries) live in a socio-political setting where violence has at best been contained, not controlled. Only 20 developed countries (15% of the world's population) have been able to control violence or have a predictable social order.

According to the authors, all societies must deal with the possibility of violence, and they do so in different ways. Most societies limit violence by political manipulation of the economy to create privileged interests. These privileges limit the use of violence by powerful elites. However, doing so hinders both economic and political development. This type of political economy arrangement is called a natural state because it appears that human societies are organised in this way.

The authors argue that such arrangement to control violence depends upon holding together the interests of groups and coalitions that view their participation as an earned privilege, and are therefore unstable, prone to crisis and violence.

Within the class of natural order societies, three are distinguished: the fragile, the normal and the mature. The normal natural state like Bangladesh achieves significant institutional development, but organisations are defined as dependent of the government as they are not impersonal.

In contemporary times, the primitive society is nearly extinct. On the other hand, only a handful of countries managed to develop open access social orders since the Second World War. The authors observed that in these societies, open access and entry into economic and political organisations sustains economic and political competition, as they are impersonal

in nature.

The institutions that Bangladesh has developed are not impersonal. They mostly serve the interests of elites, limiting violence and offering a kind of order in the society. However, limited entry and lack of competition at the same time make the system unstable and prone to violence.

These types of institutions are coined as 'extractive institutions' by Daron Acemoglu, an MIT Professor, and James A. Robinson, a Harvard University Fellow. In their New York Times best seller, titled *Why Nations Fail*, they argue that these kinds of institutions are designed to extract incomes and wealth from one subset of society (the masses) to benefit a different subset (the governing elite).

Why Nations Fail states that acute concentration of political power promotes the creation of extractive institutions. These institutions can sometimes achieve economic growth, but that is unsustainable and prone to collapse.

The framework of natural state and extractive institutions also offers insights about the sustainability of Bangladesh's development. The country has attained significant economic growth for the past two decades despite having poor institutions or weak governance, which is often called 'Bangladesh paradox.' However, history is full of examples that growth under extractive institutions could be unsustainable. The political and economic rise and fall of the

Ottoman Empire and the Soviet Union are two noteworthy examples in this regard, although it remains to be seen whether the hypothesis proves China wrong.

This prompts us to think why Bangladesh has failed to develop an open access order or why its institutions are not inclusive. According to Francis Fukuyama, in his recent book *The Origins of Political Order*, political development consists of three institutional domains: the state, the rule of law and accountability.

Fukuyama states that state building is the struggle of politics to rise beyond family ties and create a neutral system. The rule of law limits the power of government by establishing accepted rules of justice, which are higher than any individual who holds political power.

Finally, an accountable government is responsible to the people it governs.

Fukuyama observed that these three elements of modern political order had evolved separately in different pre-modern civilisations. China was the first organised state, founded in 221 B.C. The rule of law that has close association with religion existed in India, Europe and the Middle East. Europe developed the idea that it was the law that should be absolute, not the ruler. Formal accountability made an important advance in England in the

seventeenth-century.

China's strong state was, however, not restrained by a rule of law or by institution of accountability to limit the power of the sovereign. India could not develop a strong state. Prior to the late twentieth century there was persistent political disunity. England was the first country to experience the development of all three elements of modern political order.

To sum-up, being a typical natural state Bangladesh is likely to overcome its ongoing political crisis, albeit at the cost of violence or credible threats of violence. In extreme scenario, protected violence could make it a fragile natural state. As far as medium to long term outlook is concerned, there is no easy way out from its existing social and political order that is maintained with personalised organisations or extractive institutions.

A natural state has to meet certain conditions, such as unrestricted entry into economic and political organisations, inter alia to control violence or maintain a predictable social order. However, history tells us that development of a predictable political order or inclusive institutions does not happen in few decades or even a century. Nevertheless, there are some recent examples where political and economic catch-up occurred quite quickly by historical standards.

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