

# Passage to Democracy : The Bangladesh Experience

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to inquire into the changing pattern of Bangladesh politics as the consequence of conflict between authoritarianism and democracy. It argues that 'from the abode of authoritarianism Bangladesh has been struggling for a 'democratic polity'. The political class, which operates the vehicle of this struggle, generally, has a great zest for democracy. The movement against authoritarian rule of General Ershad paved the way for democratic transition and consolidation.' However, the efforts for consolidating and flourishing democratic achievements have been facing serious challenges from the existing and emerging aspects of authoritarianism. These and other related issues have been discussed in this article.

The account of Bangladesh's headway towards democracy against the tide of authoritarianism contains both successful and unsuccessful scores.' This is the consequence of her chequered history of struggle for establishing democracy. The most recent experiences in this cycle are the liberation war of 1971, anti-autocratic movement of 1990, and efforts for constitutional amendment on caretaker government during 1996. Even though all the attempts to institutionalise democracy could not be termed as fully success, they were no failed story either. By now the country has demonstrated its democratic credibility with the holding of three free and fair parliamentary general elections. At present people's representatives run the country, hence, rules by raja, budsha, nawab, governor general, viceroy or army generals have become the part of history. Even then, the social-psyche of the country is closely intertwined with the allegiance to authoritarianism. A Bangladeshi political analyst (Dr. Mahabubullah 2003) suggests that the existence of authoritarianism in Bangladesh could be noticed with a very little attention. However, it is often argued that the structure and functioning of Bangladesh's Political Parties inside and outside of the, so far, three elected parliaments since 1991, approves, among others, not very weak presence of authoritarianism. 'The people of Bangladesh could not get rid of the class-based authoritarian hierarchical social order (Khurshida Begum 1988). 'Consequently, the kinship relations and hereditary style of leadership dominate the political landscape of the country. The people, in general, to whom the country belongs, has very little or nothing to do in this regard. Observers found, 'The inability of millions, to do anything about the present art of Bangladesh politics, making people terribly aware of the huge damage which the hereditary politics inevitably does to a nascent democracy' (sub-editorial, New Age, Oct. 9, 2003)'.

In fact the hereditary style of politics could hardly be viewed as democratic. In democracy, leadership is elected through a competitive process. Accordingly, it is

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better to term hereditary politics as traditionally authoritarian. However, political parties of the country 'barely exist in an organized fashion beyond, perhaps, a leader and a select corps of followers... Besides, effectiveness of the party as a vehicle of democratic education and practice is, however, sharply limited where its working control is held in the hands of a small elite (Rupert Emerson 1960:234). The most dominant leader's among these elites have secured the position of leadership by dint of inheritance. Another way to obtain leadership in the present process of politics is "money and muscle". In different ways the hereditary leadership gets strengthened in collaboration with the holders of "money and muscle". This is quite evident as most of the members in the Jatiya Sangsad are 'newly emerged businessmen'. This could be viewed as some of the emerging phenomena of authoritarianism, which hinder the process of democratic consolidation. Seemingly, there is a conflict between the prevailing aspects of authoritarianism and expected ideals of democracy.

Theoretically, democracy attracts the people of Bangladesh as in elsewhere, but the complicated practice of democracy sometime poses frustrated scenario. Intolerance, injustice, inequalities are the breeding grounds of authoritarianism that pose challenges for democratic consolidation. The situation is not unique in Bangladesh. According to Mehran Kamarava (1995), authoritarian system is dominating the political landscape of the Third world countries. However, the prevailing authoritarian values in politics like allegiance to kinship relations, hereditary politics, traditional religious and social norms and newly emerged 'money and muscle' power in Bangladesh politics are often overlooked and condoned by the so called aspirants of democratic culture. Accordingly, the present article argues that the efforts for consolidating and flourishing democracy have been facing severe challenge from the existing and emerging aspects of authoritarianism.

**Objectives :** The specific objectives of the study are :

1. To explain how the people of Bangladesh have been struggling to achieve a "democratic polity" from the abode of authoritarianism.
2. To scrutinize and locate the existence of confrontation between authoritarianism vs. democracy in Bangladesh.
3. To have conclusion regarding success and failure of the efforts for democratic consolidation against the tidal wave of authoritarianism.

**Methodology :** This paper utilizes the data and information mostly from the secondary sources while first hand information has also been used in some cases. Nevertheless, while the reference of each and every source has been cited properly, self-observation, data and statements collected directly and used for the first time have also been duly mentioned.

However, almost all the materials of the present study have been gathered from existing literature. Besides, opinion and comments of Bangladesh's political observers and scholars on democracy have been gathered mostly from daily newspapers of Dhaka and face-to-face interviews with some concerned persons in different locations.

**Limitations of the study :** Every thing about political development of a country can not be explained and addressed in a single research endeavor. Bangladesh has gone through different patterns of political process in different stages of her political development. However, most of the political processes that were applied in different stages of history, were unsettled. Besides, most of the processes had not shown a capacity for longevity. However, each of the major historical era and stages of political development that have been investigated in the study, could have been treated in different ways and with more elaboration, however, for limited 'time and space' and to maintain the propriety of the objectives of the study, I have to cut short. Nonetheless, the success of pro-democratic movement in 1990's has helped us to omit most of the processes that were followed before the movement.

The scholarships of Bangladesh politics usually term political process of most part of ancient, medieval, and modern ages as despotic and authoritarian. We agree. However, amidst this tradition I try to locate some stray elements of democracy, which may not be satisfying.

The study offers an interpretation that most researchers, observers, and students of Bangladesh politics are not likely to get in the academic courses of the universities, nor in the mass media or mainstream political literature. The article talks about something, which may come as surprise to some academics, but there is a marked relationship between political traditions of the past and trends of present day politics. Nevertheless, the article attempts to bring forward the major dimension of Bangladesh politics, the struggle for democracy and its difficulties to proceed in an authoritarian environment.

**Definition of the key concepts :** The word democracy stands for a system of government where all the citizens can vote to elect their representatives. Besides, democracy also means fair and equal treatment of everyone in an organisation and their right to take part in making decisions. The 'common institutional core' that establishes the identity of democratic systems is competitive election, participated by bulk of the population (Huntington 1993:102). Larry Diamond (1994) argues, 'prominent theories of democracy, both classical and modern, have asserted that democracy requires a distinctive set of political values and orientations from its citizens: moderation, tolerance, civility, efficiency, knowledge, and participation. Besides, beliefs and perceptions about regime legitimacy have long been recognised as a critical factor in democracy'.

Authoritarianism, on the other hand, is a process where people obey authority and rule even when these are unfair and even if it means that they lose their freedom. Huntington (1993) terms authoritarian regime where institutional core' like competitive election is absent. In the authoritarian type, according to MacIver (1994), the organisation becomes the vehicle of a personality, the embodiment of his will. While searching a suitable antithesis (of democracy), Giovanni Sartori (1967) has termed authoritarianism as a contrario of democracy. He also indicated some other words as contray of democracy, like tyranny, despotism, autocracy,

absolutism, dictatorship and totalitarianism. Ignoring all the terminological complexity we prefer to use the term "authoritarianism" as oppose to democracy. According to MacIver (1994), 'by its constitution a democracy not only tolerates conflict of opinion but actually depends for its existence on it, without interparty conflict no democracy could continue. Every democratic government must, during its term of office, face and answer the constant attacks of at least one opposing party, and this condition has a salutary effect in restraining the dominating tendency of power.'

Upon her independence in 1971, Bangladesh has undertaken democracy as her constitutional ideology in 1972 (Sec, Professor Dr. M. Nazrul Islam, 2002; Anne Sa'adah 1998). However, the effectiveness of Bangladesh's democratic credentials has been vouched since the pro-democratic upheaval of 1990. At present, Bangladesh allows multi-party democracy, tolerate criticism in the printing media and have a constitutional process of periodic elections. However, in practice parliament has been running without the presence of opposition, and suffering from quorum crisis. Political parties are bereft of internal democracy. Moreover, there is hardly any consensus among the participant political parties on the free and fairness of the general elections. Thus the country's commitment to democracy is yet to be attained and in fact authoritarianism dominates the social and political psyche of the people at large and political class in particular.

**The abode of authoritarianism :** To appreciate and understand how political power is exercised in Bangladesh it is necessary to locate some of the salient patterns of the past. The political culture of Bangladesh is a blend of the old as well as the new.

The foundation of present day's independent Bangladesh was laid down, according to historians and Indologists, in the ancient period. Although freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and the idea of governance by discussion were not wholly absent in the ancient Bengal, however, the mode of governance was neither republic nor democracy. "The normal system of government was monarchy. And whatever the texts might advise, monarchical rule could frequently be as despotic and absolute as elsewhere in the Orient (K L Kamal)." In the earliest period the political and social life of Bengal was under strong authoritarian grip of upper class people. The society was based on caste system. Twelve or thirteen hundred years ago majority people (other than upper class population) of Bengal (major parts of present Bangladesh and Indian State of West Bengal) used to be considered as "low-born" and "untouchable" by the upper class people. While majority people had to remain half or unfed, upper class people led a very affluent and luxurious life. Thus, majority people had been far away from being satisfied. These oppressed people had got shelter under Buddhism. The Pala dynasty of Bengal was the follower of Buddhism. The people of Bengal were more lenient to the catholic spirit of Buddhism than to the Aryan system of caste. Mentionably, this majority people of the then Bengal had a thrust for liberal and non-communal attitude on life. The liberal and non-communal aspirations are nothing but democratic. Moreover, the majority people also followed the peaceful and non-

violent ways of democracy. It is often maintained by many that the democratic elements were present in the politics of Bengal during this period. However, this could not last long. The process, with democratic elements, was brutally suppressed by king Shashanka. Even after the reintegration of Bengal by Shashanka (died in about 687 A.D.) the Buddhist element was so predominant in the lives of the inhabitants that the king had to use his "authoritarian" power to extirpate its influence in some cases. The Chinese pilgrim Huen Tsang had expressed his resentment against this oppression by Shashanka on his arrival to this land in about 638 A.D (M. Afsaruddin, 1990). The unprecedented oppression and anarchy of the king had been termed as *matsyanaya* (justice of fish)<sup>1</sup>, (Bandopadhyaya, 1972, Spellman, 1968) in which the strong devour the weak.

Rule by Sena dynasty was gradually disintegrated with the conquest of the new rulers. They came sporadically in the South Asian sub-continent as raiders and conquerors from the eighth century onward and by the eleventh century they were in a position to give demonstration of their political powers. Their acts of valour had afflicted the political scenario of Bengal with sorrow and barbarity.

In 1203 riding on an extremely spirited horse, with a sword in hand Ikhtiaruddin Muhammad Bakhtiar Khilji invaded and conquered Bengal keeping his capital unprotected the ill-fated king Laxman Sen had hidden into Bikrampur of East Bengal (present Bangladesh). Laxman Sen and his heirs had safely lived there for nearly one hundred years. However, the victor hero Bakhtiar Khilji could not live long. Within three years of his invasion and occupation of Bengal he was brutally killed by one of his *aameers* (courtiers) Ali Mardan Khilji. The killing of first Muslim ruler of Bengal had set an example to be followed by many of the subsequent Muslim rulers of Bengal. Nevertheless, with different pretenses and chances this evidence was repeated one after another. The next prey of this series of killings was Sultan Gyasuddin Yoz Khilji. Yoz had been killed after 21 years of Bakhtiar's killing. Sultan Gyasuddin had transferred the capital of Muslim Bengal from Devcoat to Gour-Lakhnauti. The rebel Sultan of Bengal Tughral Khan was killed in 1282 AD. In 1300 A.D. Daraf Khan was murdered. Later on Gyasuddin Bahadur Shah was killed. Shah's son of nurse-mother, Haji Ilyas Shah was killed in 1342 AD. Ilyas Shahi Sultans had brought many *habshi* slaves from Africa. Eventually, they had also become greedy and ambitious for power. As a result, killing of seating or aspirant Sultans became rampant. The game of blood among the rulers had affected the normal life of common people. It seems that this game of blood had appeared as a curse for the Sultans. Amidst these sorts of anarchic situation, the tragic play of Plassey had been staged in 1757. The authoritarian rules of Sultans and Nawabs were replaced by the colonial rule of British Lords. Needless to mention that the face of British colonial rule had been appeared as authoritarian rule.

Under the leadership of Lord Clive the British soldiers conquered the independent Bengal after defeating the soldiers of Nawab Sirajuddoullah. The East India Company assumed the role of a king maker in Bengal immediately after the battle of Plassey. From 1765 to 1772, the company ruled Bengal as its fiefdom and the

state over which its ruler, Lord Clive presided, nothing more than a “robber state” (Panikkar, 1963:201). Karl Marx assessed impact of company’s rule on Bengal : “European despotism, planted upon Asiatic despotism, by the British East India Company, forming a more monstrous combination than any of the divine monsters...” (Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 1968). The British colonisers had looted; firstly, the treasuries of Siraj and his palace, then the capital Murshidabad and at last the whole country. Within only 13 years the food surplus area of Bengal had been severely affected by famine. One third of the total Bengali population i.e. about one and a half crore people was perished during the famine of 1769-70 (1176 Bangla year). The people of the country became aliens in their own country. Their liberty was shackled, economy was broken and ultimately the exporting country turned into a country of helpless importer. Till nearly the end of the eighteenth century the attitude of British policy-makers was based on the conviction that the Indian possession would serve mainly as a perpetual source of tribute to the Empire. During this time they did not think of any reformation or transformation of “Indian life and culture.” According to George D. Bearce (1961) the state of affairs in India, during this period, could be characterized in terms of corruption, oppressive taxation, burdensome wars, and economic exploitation.

However, the attitudes of the British colonizers gradually changed since the beginning of the next century (19th century). The aim was then an economic transformation accompanied by a civilizing mission in course of which India was to be uprooted from her age-old conservative tradition by the introduction of English Laws, western education, science and technology as well as by the importation of European ‘character’ and ‘capital’ through bodies of Western Settlers. This attitude of British liberalism was resented by Macaulay and the Christian missionaries, with their scheme of conversion and social reforms, eagerly endorsed the programme.

This outlook had also drawn inspiration partly from the teachings of the philosophical radicals on political economy, law and government. The conservative point of view was, however, opposed to the violation of the age-old traditions of Indian society partly on principle and partly on the ground of administrative efficiency. Liberal political thought of the Indian renaissance seems to have adopted a middle course (Dillip Kumar Chattopadhyay, 1990).

The growth of democratic procedures and institutions : ‘The British colonial system offered the most fertile ground for the introduction of democratic procedures and institutions. (Rupert-Emerson 1960:231’. With a series of “Acts” the British colonial rulers introduced the foundation of constitutional government, parliamentary democracy, process of representation through election etc.

**Administration :** The British authorities had developed a highly administrative system in Bangladesh. Restoration of law and order, and implementation of new notions of administration and justice were very much remarkable success of the British Raj. Nevertheless, these new notions were quite alien to the people of the then Bangladesh. Apart from the administrative system, the British Raj had also

taken some social reform steps, which were in fact revolutionary in nature; abolition of child marriage, banning of sati system (widow suicide) and female infanticide etc. could be mentioned in this respect. However, implementation of new administrative system and social reform steps were very much consistent with the maintenance of law and order. This also helped for “continuance of the British Raj”.

The administrative system involved for its functioning a group of educated men who were recruited into the British bureaucracy, but it also consisted of the merchants and traders who had thrived in the new economy. The educated middle class gradually cut itself off from the masses and became thoroughly subordinate to the ruling class (K.A. Nilakantha Sastri, and G. Srinivasachari).

In a later period this middle class included another set of people, those who challenged the very existence of the British Raj in India. Some of these same English educated, comfortably placed people became the vanguard of the nationalist movement.

**Middle Class :** The great expansion of the middle class may be one of the most significant contributions of the British in India. The British rulers introduced western education through the medium of English. They wanted a group of educated people who would be loyal to them. This system was, therefore, elitist in nature, not national and they never tried to promote the well being of the entire people. Thomas Babbington Macaulay (1952), Who was the chief exponent of this system said, “We must at present do our best to form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”.

Macaulay was utterly contemptuous of eastern learning and rated it in the following word. “... a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” In a letter Macaulay predicted, “No Hindoo who has received an English education ever remains sincerely attached to his religion (Babbington Macaulay 1952).”

Even though, subsequent history of the sub-continent had not proved Macaulay’s prediction to be true, a new wave of thought has generated in the Indians’ mind by Western education. Amidst the all-pervasive crisis in the economic front, the introduction of English education, and culture, the country witnessed the advent of modernization. A purely traditional society based on authoritarian values, exploited and oppressed by colonial rule had suddenly come under the pace of social mobilisation, caused by the process of modernization. The stable, static and backward society had got the taste of mobility.

The new education system had helped emergence of middle class population. The emergence of “middle class” geared up and facilitated the ideological ground of democracy. Aristotle<sup>2</sup> (see K. Von Fritz and E. Kapp, 1960), even in ancient period, believed that extremes in democracy is dangerous for human being. He preferred middle course and middle class population for the best practicable average of states. Thus in modern terms “middle class” population must be the social prerequisite of democracy. However, in Indian sub-continent the “middle

class" was different from any other classes those were prevailing during the pre-British era. Literary works had got published in the newly established printing presses. These works depicted the changing attitude of the population. Poet Nazrul Islam wrote, 'I do not bow any one other than myself.'

Precisely, the impact of British rule upon the society and state of the sub-continent had been formidable. However, it had been despondent and ruinous on the one hand and integrating and cohesive on the other (K L Kamal). The main cohesive contributions were introduction of a centralised administration, English Language, Civil and criminal code, institutions of judiciary, and formation of bureaucracy. Nevertheless, the impact of British rule over the Muslims was not the same as it was over the Hindus. As the British followed the policy of divide and rule, gradually the division between the two most dominant religious communities had been sharply increasing.

**Political Parties :** The political parties were also established during the British colonial period. The All India National Congress and Muslim League had been established during this time.

The All-India National Congress was founded by a group of English educated people led by a retired civil servant A.O. Hume 'to point out to the government the defects of the administration and also how these could be removed (B.L. Grover 2001)'. Muslim League, on the other hand, was established to deal promptly with Congress manoeuvring'. Even though, some time, 'the frustration and also the energies of lower middle-class and upper section of the Muslim peasantry was channelled through the party, very often, these were expressed through religious, authoritarian, and disciplined way under the centralized leadership of 'Nawabs and Zamindars<sup>3</sup> (Aminur Rahman 1997)'. In a latter period the process helped to strengthen the hand of Jinnah but ultimately 'it adversely affected the growth of responsible leadership in the Muslim League party' (Talukder Maniruzzaman, 1971). The 'structure and operations' of Muslim League had an important bearing in the political development of independent Pakistan after 1947. Due to 'limited objective' and the 'absence of well-defined and widely based political platform' the ruling Muslim League had never been successful to bring political stability in Pakistan (Zillur R. Khan, 1984). The organisational weakness and leadership gap<sup>4</sup> of the Muslim League had also compelled some Bengali (Muslim) leaders to establish Awami Muslim League in 1949 (turned into Awami League, by discarding the term Muslim in a latter period).

Nevertheless, the authoritarian leadership of 'nawabs and Zaminders' could not sustain in the face of expression of people's democratic aspirations in a latter period. The Pakistani rulers tried to imitate the British imperialists. Like the introduction of education in English medium, the Pakistani ruling class insisted to use Urdu as the medium of education and even as state language. Apparently, they wanted to use language as a political weapon for exploiting the Bengalis. This motive was opposed and the great language movement was launched. The chain of successive events bears the testimony of people's democratic aspirations in its serious forms. That ultimately led to the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state.



Furthermore, even though, there was significant difference between the 'structure and operations' of Muslim League and Awami League, this two-party has a common feature as far as the image of the main leadership is concerned. While Muslim League was flourished surrounding the leadership of Jinnah, Awami League had been strengthened centering Sheikh Mujib's leadership. The unchallenged image of this two-leader helped this two-party to ignore the presence of dissent within the party and (externally) in the country as a whole.

It may be mentioned that the establishment of Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP) by Ziaur Rahman borne the same legacy like its two prominent predecessors, Muslim Legaue and Awami League. There was none, within the BNP, to differ with the opinion of its founder. Moreover, unlike the Muslim League both the BNP and Awami League have been able to remain as the two most dominant parties of Bangladesh due to uncontested acquisition of leadership by the accepted heirs of former leaders.

To ensure proper functioning of democracy, political parties must be internally democratic and externally accountable (Daily Star, June 5, 2003, p.1,11). However, in an organisation with 'strong and unchallenged leadership' there is hardly any scope of accountability, which helps creation of extra constitutional informal groups. Party works under the strong dictate of the sole leadership.

**Representative Institutions :** The resolution on local self-government in 1882 was the one that could be viewed as an example of representative institutions that was created by the British Raj. Lord Ripon, known as liberal viceroy of India piloted this. The general principles of future local representative institutions were set forth in this resolution.

The Indian Councils Act, 1892 had increased the number of members in the Legislative Assembly and slightly enlarged their power. This act was made amidst Congress demand. However, the Indian Councils Act of 1909 based on Morley-Mintoo reforms, expended the Legislative councils. This act also introduced the process of election for the members who were non-official natives. According to this act the number of members in the central legislative council had been increased from 25 to 69 out of which 27 members were elected, 28 were the government officials nominated by the Governor General, 9 were the ex-officio members and the remaining 5 members were non-official but nominated by the Governor-General. In fact, under this act, as the word election too was a misnomer in this context. On the other hand, the 27 seats were distributed on communal and narrow sectarian lines : 6 were elected by Muslims, 6 by Hindu Zaminders, 1 each by Bengal and Bombay chamber of commerce and the remaining 12 members were elected by the Provincial Legislative Councils. The Act of 1909 was a demonstrative bounce for Hindu-Muslim unity. Accordingly, the introduction of separate electorates tended to show the discretion in which the communal politics was to move. It might be argued that the process of separate electorate was made on the demand of All India Muslim League which was founded in 1906.

In the next decade with the fast developing political awareness, the consolidation of party based politics, the sporadic violence of the so called revolutionaries, the

occurrence of World War-I altogether hastened the pace of change. Consequently, the British government realized the need of representative government in India. In course of time and with the introduction of the Government of India Act, 1919 and Government of India Act, 1935 the foundation of the representative institution was further cemented.

**The unhappy journey towards democracy :** Bangladesh's journey towards democracy was not fair and smooth. Like any other democracy it was an unhappy journey. Fundamentally, the confused and inconsistent evolution of the parliamentary democracy was the result of a conflict between the deeply held democratic aspirations of the nation and the authoritarian trend of the power politics. While presenting logic for eventual reconciliation of two-Germany and durability of the new regime Anne Sa'adah (1998) argues that all democracies emerge from dictatorships. Bangladesh's experience of democracy might not be different.

The prevailing political and social process, those were dominated by colonial rule and authoritarian beliefs (both) had come under attack by the newly emerged values of middle class population, due to growing rate of social mobilisation since the introduction of western education and culture. Some sorts of individualism had also seen to be appeared. Since then the sense of individualism could be noticed in the mindset of middle-class population. As National Poet Nazrul said, "Suddenly, I have known myself, all the barriers of mine have been unfastened."

The journey towards democracy was initiated with the emergence of nationalism. "Nationalism has its time been variously acclaimed as an integral and necessary part of democracy and denounced as the open gateway to autocracy and dictatorship (Rupert Emerson 1960:214)". The seeds of nationalism, in this part of world, have been sown in the colonial era. It was a 'confused' move by a group of Muslim nationalist leaders led by Jinnah to formulate 'two nation theory'. Even taking the 'two nation theory' as the ideological base of Pakistan, it could be safely said that it was nothing but democratic aspirations that led the people of Bangladesh to support the cause of Pakistan in 1940s. Nevertheless, the independent of Pakistan in 14th August of 1947 failed to fulfil people's aspirations for democracy. Once again they challenged the steps of Pakistani authoritarian rulers. With the pace of 1952's language movement, electoral victory of the United Front in 1954, education movement of 1962, 1966's six-point movement, 1969's eleven-point movement and lastly the first ever general elections in the then Pakistan in 1970, the people of Bangladesh had reached to the threshold of independence and democracy. The causes of these movements could be found in the democratic aspirations of the people. However, after a nine-month long bloody war of liberation against the authoritarian rulers of Pakistan, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation-state in 16 December 1971.

The independent Bangladesh had witnessed many experiments in the name of democracy and development. As the government (s) had no previous groundwork and experience for governing an independent country they had nothing to do other than making some disputed experiments and imposing martial laws<sup>5</sup>. Lastly, pro-

democratic movement facilitated the country with a declaration, which was the outcome of an unprecedented consensus among three alliances of political parties. The pro-democratic movement against the despotic rule of President Ershad was unitedly forged by three alliances of political parties. In that movement a revolutionary youth, and many others sacrificed their lives for the cause of democracy. The sacrifice of Noor Hossain has become legendary in this respect. He was shot in the chest point blank by the police through the legend emblazoned on his chest that read, "Give us democracy, down with despotism." Accordingly, the then military-dictator General H.M. Ershad stepped down from the Presidency in terms of the conditions laid down in the "declaration."

**The era of democratisation :** Although the pro-democratic movement of 1990 rekindled Bangladesh's democratic aspirations, one of the recent puzzles of Bangladesh politics is the scepticism over the consolidation process of democracy in the country. One of the causes of this tension is the confrontational nature of politics. In a parliamentary democracy the opposition stands as the partner of ruling party. However, in Bangladesh, the ruling party considers opposition as its enemy and vice versa. Nevertheless, the embarrassing curiosities on the democratic efforts of the people approve, among others, not very weak presence of authoritarianism.

The end of Ershad's authoritarian military rule in 1990's paved the way for democratisation. After the success of that united movement, the 5th Jatiya Sangsad (JS/National Assembly) had brought about the 12th Amendment to the constitution, curtailing nearly all presidential powers and establishing "Parliamentary sovereignty" epitomized by the concentration of power in the hands of the Prime Minister as long as she commands the confidence of the House. However, even after holding of three general elections under non-party caretaker government the process of consolidating democratic achievements have been facing severe blow from the traditional values of authoritarianism. Democratic theorists argue, merely parting polity from authoritarian rule might not be the surety for democracy to be consolidated. Nevertheless, democracy is not only a matter of vote. Francis Fukuyama (1992), among others, put it in this way : "There is no democracy without Democratic Man that desires and shapes democracy even as he is shaped by it." It is interesting to note that immediate after the passing of the 12th amendment, the effective functioning of parliamentary democracy has come under severe question. Parliamentary democracy loses much of its force and flair, when the opposition does not emerge as a key player. The universally acknowledged truth of partnership between the ruling and opposition parties for proper functioning of parliamentary democracy has been nullified in Bangladesh by a host of political complexities.

Authoritarianism stands against the expected ideals of democracy : It has been a hallmark of Bangladesh's politicians in opposition and in the seat of power to be concerned about their private and personal matters rather than issues of national concern. It may be viewed as such a situation where the culture of democracy is yet to be attained. As Werner Jaeger (Franz Neumann, 1957) put it "The masses were still politically inexperienced, so that democracy was far away ...". The state

of affairs in all sectors of the country has come to such a pass that it is anything but anarchic. Seemingly, although the members of the parliament have got elected to uphold democratic norms and values, their attitude and behaviour approves otherwise. As if brushing aside the attainment of democratic values the MPs of the country embrace authoritarian values.

They are least bothered when their attention is drawn to the major fundamental problems of the country. They have no respite, however, in raising their allowances, availing of a posh area house and tax-free luxury car. For democratisation of the state, interests of the people as a whole would be equally honored. However, the political approach of Bangladesh is based on sentimentalism and personality cult. The ideology, which suits the masses, takes a back seat. A small minority at the top, without internal democratic spring-cleaning controls the politics. Since independence Bangladesh has gradually facilitated "enrichment of the few at the cost of many." A noted Bangladeshi analyst (Serajul Islam Chowdhury, 2002) observes, 'democratic institutions in Bangladesh have not been encouraged to grow. Democracy is not practised in the family, where leaderships are more or less feudal. Democracy is not available in public institutions where relationships are bureaucratic. Political parties themselves refuse to be democratic, internally. The members do not elect leaders; the man leadership nominates them. The top is heavier than the bottom, which is precisely, what democratic institutions should not be.' "Absence of democratic culture within the political parties is a major impediment towards democratisation process in Bangladesh (Goswami, 2001:125)." The social and political life of the country is constrained by the intervention of social and religious norms, which have been 'carefully and deeply nurtured by social values for centuries" (M Afsaruddin, 1990). Besides, "state power has been used by all regimes to intimidate or suppress political opposition, buy support of individuals and groups and make money for personal use and party building (Rounaq Japan, 2002)." Apparently, Bangladesh's journey for democracy has been facing main challenges from the existing and emerging aspects of authoritarian values.

**Conclusion :** Bangladesh's struggle for democracy against authoritarianism has both successful and unsuccessful scores. The success stories had firstly arrived with the victory in the liberation war in 1971, making Constitution in 1972, and victory in preparing a joint declaration by the alliances of three political parties in 1990. The successful completion of this declaration emboldened the pace of democratic movement and brought the process of democratisation, with the resignation of former President Ershad. That also facilitated the reintroduction of parliamentary democracy through democratic method of consent and debate and approval of the 12th amendment to the constitution through referendum in 1991. The three Parliamentary general elections for the 5th, 7th and 8th Jatiya Sangsad are also regarded as landmark success in this regard. Besides, freedom of dissent, at least in the printing media has been recognised and all political parties tolerate the criticisms those are published in this media.

The list of challenges has far-reaching consequences for the country as a whole. The most burning example is the lack of consensus among the major political parties on basic national issues. Since 1991 on very few occasions Parliament had been seen functioning in a full House. In most of the time the main opposition was absent from the working sessions that help making the Parliament moribund. Besides, 'quorum crisis' has been added as a new phenomenon. Participation of democracy within the political parties has, as usual, remains far cry. Moreover, achieving leadership through "only kinship relations, or inheritance," and 'money and muscle' are bearing the signs of authoritarian culture being cultivated by the aspirants of democracy.

**Discussion :** The present process of Bangladesh politics consists of, among others, the interaction between class-based authoritarian society and efforts of democratisation. With sheer consciousness the existing differences between authoritarianism and democracy could be viewed. The line, between the values and attitudes those are helpful for authoritarianism on the one hand, and the efforts to democratise the state and society on the other, is obvious. Due to authoritarian style of power politics, law and order situation of the country has broken down.

The people of Bangladesh can be categorized into different classes, the rich, the poor, wealthy class, working class, privileged class, and under privileged class. Among these categories, there are dominating class and dominated class. The leading class generally includes political leaders-activists; newly emerged businessmen-cum-politicians, corrupt officials, and all classes of millionaires. The common class includes working people, jobless people, honest officials, slum dwellers, villagers, and above all labourers and farmers.

It is popular point of note that there were twenty-two millionaire families during the Pakistan era. Observers view, the number of millionaires in Bangladesh would be between 22000-50000 (New Age, November 21, 2003, p.6). Most of them reside in affluent areas of the capital city of Dhaka. A large number of them have own homes abroad. In Bangladesh, there is a widespread competition to become millionaire. The people who can catch that money are becoming millionaires. And those who cannot (catch) are becoming poor and then poorer, losers, homeless, and jobless. Observers estimate, every year one thousand people become fresh millionaires.

In a democracy improving the state of the poor is the responsibility of the ruling political class. However, the people with authoritarian attitude who are in the rat race to hold the power of becoming millionaires ignore the need. The newly emerged businessmen-cum-politicians are, in real sense, embracing the values of authoritarianism. In fact they maintain double standard in this respect. During the campaign for any election they "usually vociferously busy shedding tears for the democratic rights of the masses." However, in the real life situation they do exactly the opposite<sup>6</sup> (New Age, November 21, 2003, p.6).

During the time of nomination for general election or for making any important decisions, it is tragedy for the major political parties that the proven people are totally sidelined, and the party organisations at various tiers, including the central

executive committee, standing committee, the parliamentary party and the national committee nominally exist by default, as if in a permanent state of forced hibernation.

The authoritarian values bring no good for the legislature, the judiciary and the executive in a constitutional representative political order. The lines that are drawn between them either by the book or by practice have not only been blurred beyond recognition, but also erased altogether by the unchallenged power of existing and emerging aspects of authoritarianism. Ultimately, authoritarian values pose serious threat to the consolidation process of a nascent democratic country like Bangladesh. The political class and civil society of the country must come ahead to thwart the advancement of authoritarianism and strengthen the consolidation process of democracy.

### **Notes :**

1. The word matsyanaya could be traced in ancient India during the time of Kautilaya, where Kautilaya found that the strong tyrannised over the weak, like big fish devouring smaller ones. See, Narayan Chandra Bandopadhyay. M.A. Kautilaya or An Exposition of his social Ideal and Political Theory. R. Cambry & CO. Calcutta. 1972. pp.41-42. Also see, John W. Spellman Political Theory of Ancient India and A Study of kingship from the earliest times to circa A.D. 300, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1964, p.4.
2. Aristotle's Constitution of Athens, edited and translated by K. Von Fritz and E. Kapp, New York, 1950, Chs 14, 16 cited in Franz Neumann, The Democratic and The Authoritarian State, Essays in Political and Legal Theory, Edited and with a Preface by Herbert Marcuse, The Free press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1957, p.248
3. The feudal class known as zaminders had been the creation of the British Raj. Among others, the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 could be mentioned in this regard. By this way the ownership of land was transferred from the peasants (raiats) to the revenue collector, Zaminder. This could be sustained as long as a Zaminder made a fixed annual payment to the government. See Aminur Rahman. Politics and National Formation in Bangladesh, The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1997, p.72.
4. After the death of Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan there was no commonly accepted leader in the Muslim League party.
5. It may be mentioned that the army of independent Bangladesh inherited the experience of intervention into politics from the Pakistan army.
6. A weeklong field-level investigation conducted by a team of reporters of a daily newspaper of Dhaka found that a large number of garment factories owned by BNP and Awami League leaders never gave festival allowances to their workers. Even though, the garment workers of the country are legally entitled to get festival allowance. The festival allowance is supposed to be some sixty percent of the gross salary or the 'basic' amount of a regular worker's monthly pay. See report entitled "Politicians prove the worst paymasters." in New Age (English Daily Newspaper, Dhaka) November 21, 2003, 1-2.

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