

From Politics to Politicality: A Paradoxical Pluralism in Bangladesh



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One of the most conspicuous trends in recent Bangladesh politics is the bifurcation of two distinct political hemispheres: Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led coalition with right wing nationalist and Islamist political parties, and Awami League (AL)-led alliance with left wing secular parties. So Bangladesh is now in the brink of *Mediation pluralism*, a theory of power propounded by Toqueville and later by William Kornhauser (1959) and Robert Presthus (1964), that acknowledges the existence of numerous sets of elites, but allows for the fact that, in many settings, one set of elites, BNP and AL in case of Bangladesh, may largely dominate the others. Empirically it is close to the Marxian and elitist model of social power; however, it differs sharply from them- in its insistence that “power can be structured to allow non-elites to exert some influence on both competing and dominant elites” (Olsen and Marger 1993, p. 84). In practice, the extent of this non-elite involvement varies widely, but in theory it could come quite influential.

A second trend in the political process in Bangladesh is *politicality*, a novel term we can use to explicate the boiling down of all social affairs to politics. Politicality emerges when politics become a sole overarching unit, upon which all social affairs and activities become contingent and to which everything in society gets subservient and subordinated. Although, politics is one of dominant social institutions that exerts power and prestige, but it is not the only institution that has the optimum power. In pluralist democratic society, other institutions and agencies, such as educational institutions and its intellectuals, civil society, special interest groups, to name a few, can also have parallel power to politics. The problem arises when all these human agencies become contingent upon, and submissive to, politics and not vice-versa. Politics then dictates every human agency and limits human freedom and autonomy. This problematic relation between politics and other human agency, i.e., the subordination of human agency and freedom to politics, is a great hindrance to a country’s development and progress. The following points elucidate how:

(a) A university professor, being an intellectual, should enjoy enough prestige more than, or at least similar to, a political leader. But in politicality, his intellectual capability and leadership role in the intellectual milieu is bogged down unless he subscribes to or is submerged in a particular political party. He can not dictate, but unfortunately is dictated by, politics and its leaders; though in most cases the professor himself is more capable than the political leader(s).

(b) Politics transcends all barriers and enter into day to day life of people. All social contracts and relations such as marriage, business, codes of conduct, family relations, etc. are shaped by, and organized under the banner of, politics. Politics becomes an axis around which people organize their activities and behave as “political beings”.

(c) Politicality limits freedom and liberty as no new thought for development and prosperity flourishes as it should be flourished. As politics dictates everything, people can not think beyond this. Thinking process of most people is bogged down to a narrow political boundary. They can not enjoy freedom beyond that limited political prison.

(d) Politicality leads to a normalization of power. Important human traits, such as honesty, intellectuality, integrity, sincerity etc. get less value, while political affiliation and closeness to political leaders and bureaucracy become a huge market currency. People gradually run after this political currency, and leave the essential traits, which are of paramount need for development and progress. Political influence and power on every human being gradually becomes normalized, and people accept it as a norm for society.

(e) It hinders an emergence of a vibrant civil society and other human agency to exert positive social change. As ruling party remains more busy with confronting opposition one, so does the opposition party. Facing confrontation and retorting it from both position and opposition becomes the main feature of the society, and that leaves a very narrow scope for a vibrant civil society to emerge.

(f) Politics become a lucrative career at that time. Students put more emphasis on being a leader of a political party’s student wing than on studying hard for better future. Since getting a job is increasingly dependent more on having political links than on better academic record, many students start to think and subscribe the idea that politics will, though highly rugged way to travel, provide a better future than doing well in education, and doing well in education will have less currency than having a good political career, or, to make it more simpler, education will have less or no value unless there is any political link. Getting closeness to the political leaders to achieve their favor then becomes an ultimate aim in life for many students. Gradually politics permeates over all educational institutions. Political slogan, rather than study, becomes the main activity in campus. Teachers, for their promotion, position, facilities (as all these are contingent upon the favor of a political party/ parties/ leaders) sell off their dignity to the political leaders and try to buy a new political flavor for their career. Gradually politics become an overarching frame under which every thing gets boiled. Because of the culture of politicality, many students get degree but without proper qualities to face challenges of the modern days. Since politics gets supreme power on campus in few hands, other students tend to be precluded and thereafter a sound academic atmosphere for them is also compromised.

(g) As culture of politicality reigns society, people become more interested in developing traits of politics- chanting great slogans to appease and extol political leaders, eulogizing own political party, nurturing lobbying capacity, sometimes using arms and violence to

influence and dictate local vicinity- than on human traits for social and economic development, such as, honesty, knowledge, patriotism, civic sense, and so forth.

There is a political pluralism in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, practices of pluralism are greatly hindered because of the culture of politicality. One can therefore find some apparent paradoxes. First, mediation pluralism does not provide equal space for others to practice political wills. It is either BNP or AL that decides what to do for the country. Others' opinion is mostly unheard, or even if heard, it gets less attention, and is submerged in dominant views. Therefore, eventually the dominant elite's views and wills prevail. Second, as politicality prevails, politics dominates all aspects of social life, and leaves a very narrow space for other social agencies to grow and have equal market currency and power. Everything in Bangladesh ultimately boils down to politics, and not the other way around. Finally, even politicality is so dominant that the ruling party leaves a very narrow space for the opposition to exert their political will. The opposition is normally bereft of any development activities in Bangladesh. This also leads to destructive political agendas for the country like strike, violence, arms struggle and so on.

To disperse power and involve non-elites in power processes, an ideal pluralist model calls for a proliferation of autonomous groups, associations, and other organizations located throughout a society. These are sometimes called "special interest" associations, or "intermediate" organizations. The intermediate organizations must possess several characteristics if pluralism is to operate effectively, such as,

- The overall network they compose, but not each association, must extend from grassroots up to national government.
- Each organization must also have sufficient resources to exert some amount of influence upward, and those that operate at the national level must wield sufficient power that governmental and other elites pay attention to them and involve them in decision-making processes.
- Each organization must be relatively specialized in its concerns and limited in its power exertion, so that none of them becomes so large and powerful that it can dominate the others. In other words, there must be a rough balance of power among all these organizations.
- The organization must have cross-cutting or overlapping memberships that link them together and prevent individuals from becoming too strongly attached to any single organization.
- The organization must be functionally independent and interrelated so that they need to cooperate as well as compete with one another.
- Finally, there must be widespread acceptance of a set of rules specifying how the organizations will operate in their effects to wield power and influence the government.

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