

Bangladesh: A Study of Trends in Political Leadership (1991-2003)

Md. Safiqul Islam

Department of Political Science, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh

Abstract: It is widely assumed that political leadership is central to the process of governance, initiating a new social order and transformation in Bangladesh. Transition to democracy in itself can not bring the desired changes, national political leadership must commit to its politics and governance to increasingly focus on people and their economic well being and relate them in terms of cultural norms, community trust and accountability. It is also argued in this study that priorities of democratization have been shifting over time, moving from a focus on pre-requisites of democracy to a focus on actor-based leadership concerns, governance and civil society interaction.

Key words: Bangladesh, Political leadership

INTRODUCTION

For a nation, leadership is crucial in shaping its destiny. It is the path-finder of nation's success in stabilizing, developing and modernizing itself. Perhaps no question is as central to political discourse as that of political leadership. For if there is an irreducible fact of politics, it is that in any political society, some shall be the ruler and some the ruled^[1]. The concept of leadership as elaborated by Max Weber may be referred to three types of domination: rational, traditional and charismatic^[2]. Each of these is defined by the motivation of obedience or by the nature of legitimacy claimed by the leader. Rational domination is justified by laws, decrees, regulations; traditional domination by the past custom, spontaneous sentiments of the governed; Charismatic domination by exceptional virtue, the quasi-magical quality possessed by or attributed to the leader by those who follow him have confidence in him and are devoted to him. These three types of domination are atomic concepts. Once Winston Churchill held: to govern is to choose. The proper doing of politics lies in choosing from a number of potential and actual alternatives a policy formulation or action program to solve a problem under a given set of situation. The vital elements of politics consists in the leadership role that plays in ordering and directing human behavior and in determining the character of events^[3]. Such political leadership have unique qualities of creativity and independence. It is capable of producing from a given milieu an outcome which is not inherent in it but would fundamentally differ from what would be naturally resultant of it. For this reason, the great leaders have ability to turn situational incompatibilities into assets. Situation can be shaped to some extent but the weak leaders can be shaped by the force of the situation^[4].

Political leadership, therefore, plays the most crucial role in making democracy work. As democracy takes roots in the unfamiliar soils of non-western societies, there is a growing realization that a nation's political future, its economic strength, vitality and identity are being shaped by the political leaders. In Bangladesh, we now seem to have entered a new phase of democratic governance where structural features of our societies, cultural constraints or economic variables are less important than the politicians or political leaders who seek public office and in whom the people can repose trust^[5]. Some of the most successful leaders of our time like Helmut Kohl, Margaret Thatcher, Bill Clinton, Deng Ziao Ping, Le Kuan Yew, Mahathir Muhammad have the talents in mastering their roles and developed relationships with the people on the basis of trust. On the other hand, in many new democracies, trust is often broken by the political leaders giving rise to conflict, bad governance, corruption, social inequity, abuse of human rights and lack of ethics in the conduct of state affairs.

LEADERSHIP IN DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Leadership has always been an essential part of human condition. As long as humans have sought to meet collective goals, leadership assumes central to the task. Leadership successfully mediates between the need for stability and the need for socio-economic change. James O' Toole in his work on leading change argues that the role of political leadership is highly complicated by the fact that they have to balance the demands of competing constituents, big business, powerful families, pressure groups and civil society by listening to them all while refusing to let anyone dictate the leader's actions.

The leadership of a developing nation has to play a pioneering role in initiating a new social order. So political leadership must be creative, skillful, resolute and farsighted. Forces and resources in society have to be mobilized by manipulation and utilized for modernization of the developing nation. Barabara Kellerman, a leading American scholar of leadership studies, points to the centrality of political leaders as competent and efficient actors, who must address changes within national culture as well as international environment. Thus the great leaders have ability to turn situational incompatibilities into assets. Situation can be shaped to some extent but the weak leaders can be shaped by the force of the situation^[9].

The numerous writings by thinkers and philosophers in the western world from Plato's philosopher king to Machiavelli's prince from Hobbe's sovereign to Neitzsche's *Übermensch*- all tried to portray the nature of an ideal leader. In the oriental thought, Laotzu, Confucius, Chanakya and Jmam Ghazzali and many others wrote about the ideal ruler and gave their unique insights into the challenge of leadership in human civilizations.

Leadership has indeed become a crucial and complex phenomenon involving the leader, the followers and the context. One of the most enduring explanation has been the listing of traits that are associated with leaders. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, great man leadership theories were highly popular. The theory was built on the assumption that leadership qualities were inherited, especially by the people from the upper class. Great man theories evolved into trait theories. Traits is often referred to people's general characteristics including capacities, motives and patterns of behavior. The trait theory identifies six traits on which leaders differ from non-leaders. These are drive, desire to lead, integrity, self confidence, cognitive ability and knowledge. Other traits are charisma, creativity, flexibility. Although cultural variations are significant in leadership traits, there is no denying the fact that the theory persisted over a long time.

The Chinese who claimed to have a five thousand years of history of leadership, consistently maintained that the leaders must have talents as well as superior morality to be acknowledged by the public. Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism-all embrace values that demand considerable traits in leaders in terms of showing moral authority, individual honesty, frugality, hard work and commitment to community.

LEADERSHIP IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh (Formerly East Pakistan) emerged as an independent and sovereign state in December 1971, after having witnessed one of the most tragic and brutal

bloodbaths in modern history^[10]. Political leadership has special charm for the people of this land. It evolved through a process of people's movements and struggle over the past century. The emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 was partly driven by objective conditions arising from relative deprivation and partly inspired by the Bengali leadership to have an independent entity based on cultural identity. Leadership played an important role in the mobilization of people and motivating them to undergo bloody struggle of independence for the realization of those goals^[11]. The people of Bangladesh, therefore, have strong fascination for leaders and heroes and often rally behind them in millions. These were manifested at different periods in history. While part of this can be explained by the emotional nature of the people, but by and large, they were consciously motivated to support their leaders to improve their lots. Bangladesh has had some important leaders like Fazlul Haq, Hossain Shahid Suhrawardy, Moulana Bhasani, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman-all of whom led the people at crucial stages of the country's history for the right of the down trodden, independence, democracy and national identity.

Bangladesh's independence, therefore, drew its inspiration from the ideals of a democratic and exploitation free society^[12]. Ironically the progress made in the past thirty-three years of its independent existence in disregarding those over-optimistic hopes has proved the ultimate reality of Bangladesh. Despite many sacrifices that accompanied Bangladesh's birth and the unique homogeneity of the nation, it has been witnessing the acute syndromes of a fractured polity, bad governance, convulsive society a dual economy and a political leadership with irreconcilable beliefs, symbols and prejudices^[13]. The much converted transition to parliamentary democracy in 1991 ushered in a new brand of democratic and participative leadership that came up from the context of the struggle against authoritarian rule.

The Khaleda Zia Regime (1991-95): In February 1991, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) emerged as the single largest party in the fifth Jatiya Sangsad Polls, though slightly short of absolute majority. Begum Khaleda Zia is the unique symbol of this leadership who could invigorate BNP to come to power through a free and fair election. One of the remarkable achievements of the fifth parliament was that it scrapped the most in famous provision providing the presidential system of the constitution (Fourth Amendment) Act of 1975 through the passage of the famous Constitution Twelfth Amendment Act in September 1991^[14]. The amendment in effect restored parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh after long 16 years. In March 1991, Khaleda Zia, the leader of the

majority party in the parliament, was sworn in as the prime minister by the care taken government, President, Justice Shahauddin Ahmed.

The period of Khaleda Zia's democratic government has been challenging one-the major challenge come from governing a highly turbulent polity with a contradictory tradition of rule and conducting politics in an environment of mistrust, factional political culture and rent-seeking behavior of political elite. Despite such constraints, the first three years of Khaleda regime made some notable success in the governing process: it was able to reinvigorate the bureaucracy, bring confidence in law-enforcing agencies, restore the independent character of the judiciary and revive the image and status of the parliament^[15]. Compared to previous four parliaments, the fifth national parliament had representation of major political parties, spent 400 working days, passed five budgets, saw the passage of 172 bills and witnessed the formation of fifty-five parliament committees.

In economic front, the BNP government has been able to retrieve the economy from colossal mismanagement and distortions perpetuated during the previous government. Through stabilization and structural adjustment policy, the democratic government took a series of austerity measures, rationalized the tax-structure, introduced the new Value Added Tax (VAT) system and streamlined credit facilities of nationalized banks and other financial institutions^[16]. New incentives were given to encourage private investment particularly from foreign countries and some measures were initiated to check the widespread loss of confidence in an increasingly corrupt and mismanaged public sector. Although, the Khaleda Zia government could not make a significant breakthrough in economic front-the growth rate being modest hovering around 4.5 percent annually, the regime did not face any serious economic crisis. The regime has all along been uncomfortable position with regard to food availability at an affordable price which is often seen as the principal measure of economic well being in Bangladesh. The main economic worries came from the difficult unemployment situation, income inequality and endemic poverty of the majority of the populace. There is, how ever, not doubt that some progress has been made during this period towards poverty alleviation through the government human development efforts and social uplift programs of scores of NGO's^[17].

In law and order issue, to the continuance of the special Power Act (1974) the Khaleda Zia's government was implementing the anti-terrorism act with care and objectivity. This act, passed without the participation of the opposition parties, was, however, branded as a black law. But as times rolled on with its implementation, the opposition's feats seemed to be waning and the act

earned the confidence of the people as a deterrent measure against violence and physical damages to life and property^[18].

Bangladesh opted for a parliamentary system of government- a fine choice indeed. But the success of a parliamentary government, as experiences of other countries show, hinges mainly on the level of development of political parties and the farsightedness of their leaders especially as Prime Minister or the leader of the opposition. Those positions are more constitutional, limited and less exalted and the leaders have to sustain their power and influence on the party and the state power operating within certain rules and traditions. The democratic government of Khaleda Zia could not properly handle this crucial aspect of parliamentary politics in an environment where political institutionalization has been very difficult and politicians are highly power-centric not socialized adequately with parliamentary norm and behavior.

Politics in Bangladesh has also important linkages with the personality of leaders. The personality clashed of leaders coming from 'hereditary political process and symbolizing different values and prejudices often brook no compromise. Therefore, despite many positive development in Bangladesh politics since 1991, democratization faced serious problem in resolving power conflict in a compromising and peaceful manner. The continued boycott of the parliament by the opposition members of the parliament drawn mainly from the Bangladesh Awami League and their subsequent resignation in support of a contrived 'Neutral Caretaker Government' at the end of 1994 created a lingering political crisis. The year 1995 and the first half of the 1996 witnessed a period of intense political movements by the opposition that virtually shutdown the economic activities through hartal. The state seemed to become helpless which could neither coerce nor accommodate the interests of the contending parties and finally transformed into what some people called in the African context-a Collapsed State.

Sheikh Hasina Regime (1996-2001): The second transition to democratic governance brought Sheikh Hasian, the daughter of Bangladesh's founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Sheikh Hasina leads the Awami League (AL).The AL, which led the Bangladesh movement and ruled independent Bangladesh from 1971-1975 and came to power again in 1996 and has its origin in East Pakistan Awami Muslim League, founded by Maulana Bhashani in 1949^[19]. Later in 1963 the party dropped the word 'Muslim' and came to be known as the East Pakistan Awami League to give it a secular flavor, it was renamed the Bangladesh Awami League.

The caretaker government (non party interim government) of justice Habibur Rahman promptly set the date of the election for the seventh parliament on 12 June 1996. In the election the AL emerged as the largest party securing 146 seats^[20]. One elected independent member later joined the AL raising the strength of the party to 147 seats in the parliament. Therefore, immediately after the election to have a simple majority the AL needed one more seat. With the support of the Jatiya Party (JP) the AL acquired the required number in the parliament to form the government. The president invited Sheikh Hasina, the president of the AL, as the leader of the majority party in the parliament to form a new government. On June 23, 1996, Sheikh Hasina was sworn in as the prime minister of Bangladesh.

Immediately after taking the oath, the new Prime Minister formed a cabinet with leaders of her party and two cabinet members were taken one each from the JP (Anowar Hossain, Mongu) and Jatiya Samaj Tantric Dal-JSD (A.S.M. Abdur Rab). With the support of the JP the AL garnered enough support in the parliament to form the government. After becoming the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared that her government was one of a national consensus. In a vague gesture she also invited all the parties in the parliament including the BNP to join her consensus government. But the BNP rejected the idea of a government of national consensus. The BNP claimed that it was a coalition government and declined to join the cabinet^[21]. Khaleda Zia even claimed that this was another version of 'BAKSAL', one party system, formed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1974^[22].

In 1997 two BNP MPs Dr. Alauddin from Rajshahi and Hasibur Rahman Sawpan from Mymensingh were inducted to the AL ministry as state Ministers. These two BNP MPs were later expelled from their party and BNP Parliamentary Chief Whip asked the Speaker of the House to vacate their seats according to the provision of article 70 of the Bangladesh Constitution. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina pledged an impressive array of political, economic and social policies and programs curbing violence and terrorism, restoring independence of judiciary, granting autonomy of the television and radio, strengthening the role of parliament, ensuring transparency and accountability of the government, accelerating economic development process and helping the poor and the disadvantaged. The government's identification of problems areas were largely appropriate. But the performances in most areas, so far, full for short of the promises.

The seventh Parliament also did not work successfully as during most of its tenure the opposition parties boycotted the sessions of the parliament^[23]. The

opposition parties, mainly the BNP, Jatiya Party (Ershad Faction) and Jamaat-E-Islami were boycotting of the AL government continuously. The hollowness of the parliament was reflected in its inability to stem the tide of violent politics and bring the political action from the streets to the house for resolution of conflict through meaningful debates and dialogue. Rather, the unnecessary and controversial debates within parliament and the frequent boycott of its sessions by the opposition members aggravated the situation. The nonfunctioning of the committee system for long time due to extreme 'partisan' out look also undermined the power of the parliament as an institution. The Prime Minister's inclination to avoid facing the parliament in explaining some major decisions including agreements with foreign countries and the opposition leader's skepticism about the effectiveness of parliament both contributed to the weakness of the parliament in resolving vital national issues.

The worst is, of course, over politicization of the army, police and the bureaucracy, which the AL government began immediately after assuming power. The police administrations suffered from the most rampant politicization and is continuously being used as an instrument of repression rather than sentinels for protection. The law and order situation has not been under control. The coordination council of Human Rights in Bangladesh has reported that in the period between July and September 1997, there were 218 cases of rape and 49 cases of acid throwing in Bangladesh^[24]. In 1999, there were 2394 cases of murder, 12 persons died in police custody, 11 cases of unnatural death in the prison^[25]. The 1999 country reports on human rights published by the US Department of State observed.

The government continued to arrest and detain persons arbitrarily and to use the Special Power Act (SPA) and section 54 of the code of procedure, which allow for arbitrary arrest and preventive detention, to harass political opponents and other citizens by detaining them without formal charges. The government filed numerous criminal cases against opposition leaders, activities, at least some times these charges were false^[26].

The government also enacted a Public Safety Act (PSA), which was also vehemently opposed by all the opposition parties. The parliament passed the bill without the participation of the opposition parties. The opposition parties were apprehending that the government passed the law in the face of strong opposition movement against the government to suppress the opposition parties^[27]. The newspaper reported that there were already more than ten thousand people arrested under the special power act and they were waiting behind bars. The 1999 Annual Human

Rights reports published by the US Department of State also confirms these facts^[28]. The AL while in opposition in 1992 opposed such a law enacted by the BNP government. The BNP, when in opposition, opposed the Public Safety Act. In fact, criminal activities were on the rise not because of the absence of law but because of the ineffectiveness of already existing laws.

The military was dwarfed by selective promotion, reward and punishment. The purchase of MIG29 and naval frigate without proper assessment of defense needs, indicates compromising of national security interests for personal or coterie gains. The AL government's attitude towards higher judiciary had been extremely negative as it failed to influence it to partisan advantage. The bill for separation of judiciary from the executive a long standing demand of the civil society was far from reality.

The stock market debacle was, perhaps, the single most important event of the AL regime in 1997 that cast somber shadow on the economy with serious social costs. There was a panic about the liquidity position of the commercial bank and the government is yet to streamline credit facilities and improved bank loan recovery raising serious questions about the nature of the regime and the state itself. Industry continued to suffer due to a lack of domestic demand. The power supply shortages have become a scandal causing serious concern and doubt in government's efforts to achieve the desired growth rate in addition to enormous sufferings of the people. The AL government's drive to attract foreign direct investment through a series of measures including the opening of export processing zones, providing a number of benefits to foreign investors and prime-ministerial overseas trips largely failed. Despite substantial pledges by foreign investors, actual direct investment so far had been minuscule. The government, however, has shown vacillation, in efficiency and non-transparency in responding to those opportunities. In the financial sector, the government has visibly failed to bring about any breakthrough. Media reports shows clearly that the government resorted to pursuing partisan policy in disbursing bank loans and reports of big and new defaulters had also been published. The capital market was in shattered condition despite the extensive rhetoric of the finance minister to revitalize it.

In social sections, the AL government's extensive rhetoric had not been compatible with the reality. Its record in taking effective measures for poverty alleviation and employment generation has been poor and whatever policies were initiated in 1996-97 could not be properly implemented. While there was an increment of allocation in human resource development particularly in education and poverty alleviation programs like food for works,

Vulnerable Group development relief programs, inadequate implementation and leakage's at that level seriously constrained the government's efforts.

Four party alliance government (2001-2003): The general election of the eighth parliament was held on October 1, 2001. The four-party alliance (BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP) and Islami Oikkaya Jote) was 216 seats out of 300. The AL won sixty-two seats and Jatiya Party won fourteen seats^[29]. The behavior of the political leaders after the eighth parliamentary election of October 1, 2001 also needs to be scrutinized. Although the AL fought for non-party caretaker government (NCG), to conduct the national elections, it criticized the NCG's role severely after the defeat in the election. The AL blamed the NCG for rigging the election in favor of the BNP and its allied parties^[30]. But the national and international election monitors, the media, the civil society acclaimed the election as fair and free. On October 10, 2001, Khaleda Zia was sworn in as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Immediately after taking power, Khaleda Zia's government committed to build a prosperous Bangladesh free from all dimensions of poverty, corruption and violence, establish rule of law and promote human rights. In fact, in its election manifesto, BNP committed itself to reform in policies and institutions for promoting good governance, principles of market economy, poverty reduction and economic growth with macro economic stability and participatory local government^[31]. After assuming the state power, the four-party alliance leadership declared a 100 days program to improve the fast deteriorating conditions of the country specially the law and order situation. There is no doubt that the new government inherited many problems. The most vexing problem facing the government is terrorism and corruption. In fact, the defeat of the AL government was greatly attributed by terrorism and unbridled corruption in almost all sectors. The alliance government could do a little improve to this situation rather in some cases it deteriorated further^[32]. The political leadership of Khaleda Zia has taken this enormous challenge to improve the situation that is accumulated by the failures of the previous regime. A powerful monitoring committee has been established composed of senior officials and cabinet members to monitor the law and order situation weekly and make appropriate recommendations. The Law and Order Disruption Crimes (Speedy Trial) Act, 2002 that introduced speedy trials of certain offences under a special court, in periods of 30-60 days and provision of serious punishment, is producing result. Offences under the law include hindering normal air, rail, road and river

traffic movement, vandalism to transport, causing damage to private or public property, extortion, terrorism in public places, obstructing tender proceedings and obstructing the work of the public officials.

In October 17, 2002, government called out army troops to tackle deteriorating law and order situation named 'Operation Clear Heart'^[33]. The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) is in force to combat grisly and heinous crimes effectively. The ongoing hunting down drive against the criminals received wide acclaim from the peoples of all walks of life^[34].

The dominating public perception remains that police and criminal justice system are inefficient, complex and corrupt. The main task ahead is to ensue the implementation of existing laws and it is necessary for political leaders to take a hard look at the implementation issues, assume responsibility not to shelter the criminals on political affiliations irrespective of parties and devise appropriate measures to ensure monitoring to the entire criminal justice system. In fact, the main burden for producing and maintaining human security for all citizens falls on the political sector, including leaders and workers. It is or abiding hope... that political leaders and workers in both governing and opposition parties will meet this challenge^[35].

In most South Asian Countries, including Bangladesh, corruption has become an enduring patterns of public life that poses a threat to democracy and development. Corruption stifles democratization and destroys the trust between the leaders and the people. The political leadership of Khaleda Zia is committed to curb corruption by establishing responsibility and accountability at all levels of the government. The recent establishment of an independent anti-corruption commission is a step in the right direction. In fact, effective investigation and enforcement machinery will deter corruption in many sectors. Repeated documentation of waste, fraud and abuse of public funds resulting in action many discourage further corrupt practices.

Prime Ministerial leadership in parliamentary system is based on legitimacy and performance centering the parliament and governance structures. The alliance government had to face continuous boycotts of eighth parliament by the AL MPs. The AL led by Sheikh Hasina expressed her total dissatisfaction with the October election result and asked for cancellation of the votes on the grounds of massive rigging and unfairness in the voting process, although the international and national independent observers reported that the October 2001 election was held in a fair, free and peaceful environment. It is maintained that the reasons for which the AL under

Sheikh Hasina's leadership boycotted Jatiya Sangsad session and their plan to publish white paper on October polls were unfounded. The AL leadership's attitude was not like a statements rather like a seasoned politician. However, the AL joined the last summer session of Jatiya Sangsad for a brief period but later on continued its program of boycott for not finding Congenial atmosphere created for them in the House. The main opposition AL very recently changed its mind and expressed their determinations to join autumn session of the Jatiya Sangsad. This time, the AL seemed to be more concerned about the formation of Parliamentary Standing Committees on different ministries. In fact, it is surprising to note that the eighth parliament completed its three sessions so far but without forming the committees deemed crucial in a parliamentary system. Undoubtedly, AL's changed attitude may help institutionalize parliamentary system in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, Professor Dr. Iajuddin Ahmed was sworn in as the seventeenth president of the country of September 6, 2002. Professor Ahmed succeeded Professor A.Q.M. Badruddoza Chowdhury who resigned on June 21, 2001. The new president expressed his determination to uphold the constitution and asked the countryman to work for its development, forgetting all differences and conflicts. The main opposition party AL and some left parties neither attended the swearing in ceremony nor congratulated the new President. Rashed Khan Menon, a leader of a leftwing party congratulated Professor Ahmed, not only because he is a distinguished academic but also his active participation in the anti-autocratic movement during 1990s. On the other hand, opposition leader Sheikh Hasina appeared skeptical about new president's promise to play neutral role as he (President belongs to BNP).

The parliament should not be the battle ground, for two or major parties where most of the parliamentary time is wasted on war of words and meaningless controversies vitiating the peaceful conduct of legislative business and raising political heat outside the parliament subsequently. In such environment, negotiation, bargaining and compromise are difficult to achieve.

CONCLUSIONS

Bangladesh has been facing the questions of the state, its capacity, legitimacy and values with greater complexities added by new imperatives of global order, regional environment and democratization. Bangladesh has chosen the path of democracy and achieved some positive gains. The procedures of democracy are clearly established, but its substance is yet to be achieved. The degree of political participation of the people, the quality

of debate in the parliament and availability of real political choice are often questionable. The fragility of democratic process in terms of standard of governance and human security still persists and political violence and corruption are yet to be reversed. The institutions of governance need to be strong, efficient and responsive. The value framework of political leadership is crucial in the process of evolving such institutions. An honest, patriotic and rational leadership can have far reaching impact on the pattern of political and economic changes of nations

Bangladesh is fortunate to enjoy a unique homogeneity as a nation, but its political leaders espouse seemingly irreconcilable beliefs, symbol; and values creating stress and instability in the system. There remains, therefore, a perpetual fear that the opposition political forces will increasingly become restive and dysfunctional. The party in power has the right to rule for the specified term and the opposition has the right to concentrate on electoral politics and raise alternative policy issues and options. Samuel P. Huntington in his notable work on democratization observed, Economic development makes democracy possible, political leadership makes it real. In the same vein, I would like to stress that Bangladesh needs new roles and new behaviors from its political leaders who should be more tolerant and performing for the people.

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