

Analysing, Democratic Backsliding In Bangladesh: A Critical Examination Of 2018

General Elections And Electoral Integrity

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Abstract

In the past decade Bangladesh has witnessed gradational, yet consequential decline of democracy. Two successive rigged elections in 2014 and 2018, adoption of legal measures to restrict freedom of expression, increasing occurrences of extrajudicial killings and claims of vote rigging bears evidence to the democratic backsliding. This article traces the pathway to this backsliding. As Bangladesh's democratic journey began two decades after its independence, this article focuses on the 11th general election of Bangladesh held in 2018, which critics argued that the said election was totally rigged. I argue that the Bangladesh has transformed from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy.

Key words: Democratic Backsliding, Vote Rigging, 2018 General Elections, Autocracy.

Introduction

A general agreement on what do you mean by democracy is all important before democratic backsliding is to be understood. In common words, democracy is characterized as that kind of Government that conducts regularly multi-party elections under the scrutiny of the fundamental law of the land that is constitution. The election to be free and fair & thereby democratic, require freedom to advocate, contest and Campaign. In addition to this the biggest success of democracy is that the opposition parties must accept their defeat. For that it is pertinent that there should be a free and neutral electoral system, a credible mechanism of dispute resolution, freedom of press and mass media as well as Independent vote monitoring mechanism. Democratic electoral system includes three elements --- Democratic electoral system, conducting free and fair elections, whereby losing side accept the defeat, freedom of speech and expression and stable and non-corrupt administrative system. For a complete understanding of the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, conceptualizing the quality of democracy is important as it affects operationalization, measurement and analysis of the phenomenon of democratic backsliding. Democratic backsliding is defined as "the state led debilitation or elimination of any of the

political institutions that sustain an existing democracy”. (Barreiro’s). Waldner and Lust (2015) view it as “changes that negativity affect competitive elections, liberties and accountability”.

Democratic backsliding display through erosion of faith in democratic government among elites and citizens, erosion of support for democratic institutions. The concept of democratic backsliding is often equated with democratic regression, rollback, transition or breakdown. Increasingly, democracies around the world, more specifically in south Asia under stress through erosion and decay. Democratic decline is characterized by decline in the stability of political institutions, decline in political participation and violation of rule of law. The six variants of democratic backsliding --- coups d’état, executive coups, election day vote fraud, promissory coups, executive aggrandisement, strategic harassment and manipulation.

Objectives

(I) To analyse and examine backsliding of democracy in Bangladesh after independence.

(II) To evaluate critically the backsliding of democracy with respect to 2018 general elections held in Bangladesh.

Methodology

The methodology adopted in the study is descriptive, analytical, historical and empirical. Required information is collected from various journals of political science, books, newspapers and research articles.

Discussion

The discussion will be held on what does democracy mean and what are the parameters for the successful democracy. In addition, the main focus of this paper will be the backsliding of democracy in Bangladesh especially during the reign of Sheikh Haseena and in particular 2018 general elections. Democracy and South Asia: Democracy in South Asia is experiencing a worrying decline. Facts point towards a consistent backsliding. Recent unfair elections held in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Maldives, highlight the ongoing erosion of democratic values in the region. In Bangladesh, the 2024 general elections resulted in Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the Awami League, securing her fourth consecutive five - year term as prime minister. The campaign was impaired by controversy and was boycotted again by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist party – a decision that stemmed from the Awami League’s refusal to establish a caretaker government to oversee the election process. Described widely as a “ Sham election” election a backdrop of violent protests and government crackdown, contributing to a notably low

voter turnout. These conditions have intensified concern about Bangladesh's trajectory towards authoritarianism, casting doubts on the integrity and inclusivity of the electoral process. In Pakistan, the election conducted on 8th February 2024 was impaired by accusations of irregularities and a lack of fairness, particularly with regard to the treatment of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) political party. The military's effect remained significant, effectively arranging the various aspects of the political process. The military made solid efforts to stop another former Prime minister Imran Khan and his PTI party, from returning to power after Khan's removal through a vote of no-confidence in April 2022. Imran Khan himself was sentenced to decades in prison in three separate cases in the week before the onset of the election. The PTI faced significant repression, which included depriving the party of its political symbol, the Cricket bat by the supreme court. Many PTI leaders were either arrested or coerced into leaving the party. As far as Island country of South Asia "Maldives" is concerned its case is quite different and the 4th multi – party Presidential elections held in 2023, Resulting in the triumph of opposition leader Mohammad Mizzu. The previous President, Ibrahim Solih, lost following a split in his party. Although the election was relatively competitive and peaceful, independent observers accused the government of using state resources to sway the electoral outcome and of incentivising the media with financial rewards in exchange for favourable coverage. Allegations of widespread vote buying were also prevalent during this period, undermining the equity and fairness of the election. Finally, India acclaimed the attribute of world's largest democracy, the recently held 18th Lok Sabha elections in 2025 led the victory of NDA led by the BJP in its third consecutive term since 2014, although this time BJP won 240 seats, 63 seats less compared to 2019 elections 303 mark. Despite the fact that the critics laid various allegations regarding the 2025 general elections of India, but the truth is that the major opposition party accepted the verdict of the people, as the biggest success of democracy is that the opposition parties must accept their defeat.

Democratic Backsliding After Bangladesh's Independence

Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971, and the Constitution came into force in 1972 by introducing unicameral legislature based on the First Past the Post System with 300 directly elected seats. Despite the promise of liberal democracy, the country witnessed the first rigged election in 1973, shifting away from a parliamentary to presidential system of government and later in 1975 through the fourth amendment of the constitution, Bangladesh

turned into a one party populist authoritarian state. The government was replaced through a violent military action in August 1975 when the president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with the family members were brutally killed. In the following 15 years , the country witnessed military rule and several failed crops, assassination of another president – Zia – ur– Rahman in 1981 and the rise of another military leader – HM Ershad in early 1982.

While I agree with Levitsky and Ziblatt about the elements of each stage and process of backsliding. I agree that Bangladesh experienced a different sequencing. As far as Bangladesh's backsliding is concerned, the process started with the change in the Constitution, which allowed a non – inclusive election, followed by the persecution opposition leaders and curbing the freedom of speech and expression and targetting the state institutions such as the Judiciary and law enforcement agencies.

General Elections Of 2018 In Bangladesh: A Case Study

On 30th December 2018, the 11th general assembly election took place in Bangladesh, to elect 300 directly elected members of the “JatiyaSangsad”. The result was another land sliding victory for the Awami League Grand Alliance led by Sheikh Haseena. The elections were disfigured by violence and were widely considered by opposition politicians and the international community to be rigged. According to political scientist Ali Riyaz, “the elections were not free and fair” .BBC news among others observed some apparent vote rigging by the ruling party “Awami League”. With some critics referring to it as the “Midnight election” due to ballot boxes allegedly being filled the night before the election day. Opposition leader “Kamal Hossain” rejects the results called it “Farcical” and demanding fresh elections to be held under an impartial government. The Bangladesh election commission said “it would investigate reported vote-rigging from all over the country”.

Electoral System Of Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi parliament “JatiyaSangsad” consist of 350 members of which 300 members are directly elected by method of First – past – the – post system in single member constituencies and an additional 50 seats reserved for women. These reserved seats are distributed based on vote share of the contesting parties. The elections are held after 05 years. 151 seats are required to form the government. The Prime minister is the head of the government and president is the head of the state is elected by the national parliament. The President is the nominal head and does not exercise any control over the functioning of the state. Prior to the 2024 Bangladeshi

constitutional crisis, the country had a two party system that had evolved time since the election of 1991. The overall electoral scene of Bangladesh was dominated by two political parties or coalitions --- one headed by Bangladeshi Awami League and the other by Bangladesh nationalist party. However, over the years, Jatiya Party (Ershad) has enjoyed electoral success by winning several local and Mayoral elections and thus acclaimed the title of primary opposition party.

Background

The previous general elections in January 2014 were boycotted by the main opposition alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and former prime minister Khaleda Zia. As a result, the Awami League led by Prime minister Sheikh Haseenawon a landslide victory, taking 234 of the 300 seats in an election that saw 153 seats uncontested. Meanwhile in July 2017, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party stated that it was ready to contest the next general election if parliament was dissolved and the Election commission consisted of non partisan members. Subsequently, on 14th September 2017, the official chief election commissioner confirmed that BNP would contest the elections. However, following the conviction of BNP chair Khaleda Zia for corruption, the High court of Bangladesh ruled Zia was ineligible to run for office. Jamaat – e – Islami a Right wing Islamist party was banned in 2013 by the High court, acting their charter violates the constitution. Hence in 2018 elections 25 candidates of Jamaat Islami ran the election with 22 with the nomination of BNP and 3 as independents. Moreover, Khaleda Zia filed nomination paper for the Bogra – 6, Bogra –7, and Feri – 1 constituencies. All three sets of nomination papers were rejected by the election commission as a result of her conviction in two corruption cases.

Bangladesh's Shaken Elections

Bangladesh's ruling coalition has secured a landslide victory in 2018 general elections polls, but critics argued that “ Grand Alliance” has won by tampering the country's Constitutional Institutions. “I went to a polling center to cast my vote in Narayanganj, a district in central Bangladesh, yesterday morning, but a polling officer told me that my vote had been cast already by someone else,” Rehana, a photojournalist told DW. “It's not happened just with me. I have seen hundreds of frustrated voters standing outside polling centers who were not able to cast their votes due to the same reason,” she said.

Complaints Abound

Like Rehana, many other people said they were not able to cast their votes yesterday, when Bangladesh's ruling party swept the elections. The Grand Alliance, led by Sheikh Hasina's Awami League party, secured 288 out of a total of 299 seats — a record win in the country's parliamentary polls since democracy was restored in 1990. But there are many questions about the polls' validity. Local media reported that more votes had been counted in a constituency in Bangladesh's southern city of Khulna than the total number of voters in the area. An opposition candidate there said that ballot papers had already been stamped and ballot boxes filled the night before by the ruling party activists. An international media correspondent also captured filled ballot boxes even before the polls opened on 30th December 2018. Moreover some voters also complained about getting ballot papers in which the ruling party's symbol had already been stamped. In some cases, people were instructed to vote for the party when they were casting their votes in polling centers. "When I went to cast my vote, it already had a seal on it and I was asked to put it in the box," Robin Hasan, who had taken some time off from his job at a European university to come down to Dhaka to vote, told DW. "I requested a new ballot sheet so I could put my voting preference on it myself. I was given a new ballot," he said, adding, "However, I was instructed to vote for a particular candidate in front of them. I declined and requested for my right to cast my preference in a private space. The voting officer granted it." Hasan also pointed out that some other voters had to vote in the presence of the voting officers and that the ballot paper he refused to accept was also dropped into the ballot box.

Voters Accuse Of Irregularities On Social Media

Although the mobile internet network of the country was shut off the night before and during the polling period on 30th December, it was briefly opened for four hours in the evening on next day. Many ordinary voters took to social media during the short period to complain about not being able to cast their votes. The internet network was shut down again overnight. Tasneem Khalil, a Bangladeshi-Swedish journalist, who has been monitoring the election on social media, said, "Since mainstream media in the country cannot report freely, we are relying on social media to gather evidence of rigging, incidents of violence and other abuses carried out by the security forces and activists affiliated with the ruling party." "What we saw in Bangladesh on the election day, in constituency after constituency and polling center after polling center, cannot be called an election. It was a massive, unprecedented rigging operation designed to rob Bangladeshi voters of their franchise," he added. As far as the reaction of opposition parties are concerned the

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), with other political groups has formed an alliance called the Jatiyo Oikyafront, rejected the results of the election citing voter fraud. “The widespread rigging happened within the polling centers and in front of the administration. A large number of votes were cast in favor of the ruling party on the night before the election day by ruling party members,” Zonayed Saki, an independent candidate of a constituency in Dhaka alleged, adding, “They also removed all the polling agents of other candidates from the centers, creating doubts about the vote-counting process as well.”

Conclusion

Bangladesh’s favourable beginning towards democratization in 1991 has taken a wrong turn, the country had transformed from an electoral democracy to an electoral hegemonic authoritarianism regime by 2018. The opening pace of the transformation – from electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy was slow. But the pace hastened after 2009 and was distinctively different from the general erosion of democracy in previous decades. The 2018 general elections witnessed 80% turnout but critics, common people, opposition parties, media as well as certain International election observers raised certain questions regarding the validity, transparency and impartiality of the electoral process. Here , I am agreeing with “Ali Riaz” that since 2009 Bangladesh had metamorphosed from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy. In 2024 Bangladesh witnessed political turmoil, which ended Sheikh Hasina’s long rule and brought down the Awami League government. Yet, the nation’s journey towards democratic renewal remains full of contradictions.

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