Development and Democracy:
Primacy of Inclusiveness and Accountability

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Syed Manzoorul Islam
Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka and Member, Board of Trustees, TIB

The end of western colonial rule in different parts of the world saw the emergence of many new countries, some with new names and territorial maps. Many of these countries opted for democracy as their governing principle, although some—particularly in Africa—persisted with the tradition of authoritarian rule, which was an unfortunate legacy of colonialism. India adopted a democratic constitution, and has, to this day, continued to practice parliamentary system of government. Pakistan too, took the path to democracy, but after a shaky few years, gave in to military rule. Bangladesh, as a part of Pakistan garnered some early democratic dividends which were reflected in the victory of United Front, a coalition of political parties from East Bengal in the 1954 election. And, in spite of the authoritarian rule that continued until 1969 when a popular movement ousted the military ruler Ayub Khan from power— the Bengalees never gave up on the ideals of democracy. Indeed, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Bengalees resisted the tyranny and oppression of the Pakistani regimes which led to an inevitable clash between two opposing ideologies—one egalitarian and progressive, pursued by the Bengalees, and the other outdated and elitist, pursued by the Pakistanis. Thus, one of the principles that guided our war of independence in 1971 was democracy, which was enshrined in our 1972 constitution. After some unfortunate early set-backs, democracy picked up pace, only to be thrown overboard after the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most members of his family.

For a decade and a half, the country suffered under direct and indirect military rule, which not only denied the citizens their fundamental political rights, but rehabilitated elements from the far right, including persons accused of war crimes. The decade and a half brought irreparable democratic deficits that even today, despite two decades and a half of democratic practices, we haven’t been able to recover.

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Globally, the decades following 1980s witnessed a resurgence of democracy in many parts of the world, including Africa and South America. Many socialist countries also made a transition to democracy. While most of these countries have maintained relatively satisfactory levels of democratic practices, some, such as Russia, have shown an inclination towards an authoritarian version of democracy. The Arab Spring, beginning in December 2010, promised the arrival of democracy in countries of the African crescent and the Middle East, but none of these countries has been able to fulfill the promise. In Turkey, where the military has a history of staging successful coups, the end game came in July this year, when a section of the army staged a blotched coup, effectively sealing the military’s prospect of running the state any time soon. But the success with which the political government handled the coup has not meant a further strengthening of democracy. Rather, the opposite has happened. Turkey now is as authoritarian under a political government as Egypt is under a military one, although President Erdogan has been able to mobilize public sentiment against the attempted military takeover.

In course of the last few years, the world has seen a recession of democracy in many countries including Thailand, Venezuela, Russia, Nigeria, the Philippines, and sadly, Bangladesh. The January 2014 elections in Bangladesh witnessed the unfortunate abstention of a major political party. The party has offered a number of reasons for its abstention which the government quickly refuted, but the upshot has been a parliament where a huge number of lawmakers have been elected uncontested. The debate about whether the elections were democratically valid or not still rages, but the repercussions of the debate, at this distance of time, are, at best, of theoretical interest, as the people, by and large, have accepted the incumbency, as has the international community. Indeed, major world actors, including USA and EU have shifted their attention to the 2019 elections which they urge the government to conduct ‘in the spirit of true democracy.’ Ironically though, Bangladesh seems to have receded from the norms of democratic practices enshrined in our constitution.

As demands for mid-term elections were raised even a few months ago by opposition political parties and a section of civil society, the government quickly rejected them, and some of its frontline leaders even went on to pose the rhetorical question: ‘Which is more important – democracy or development?’ The underlying message was simple: the government intended to pursue its development agenda, and any attempts to shortchange it in the name of democratic rights would be resisted. More enthusiastic of these leaders even referred to the Singaporean experiment where the country, under controlled democracy, made spectacular development gains.
A few mentioned Indonesia, Korea and Taiwan, although these countries, in more recent times have become more open and tolerant, compared to a decade earlier.

‘Democracy or development’ has been a long running debate in our country which hasn’t seen any clear winner. The main argument seems to be an essentialist one: does electoral democracy facilitate or impede development. While conventional wisdom maintains that economic development and democracy are not only interlinked, one indeed necessitates the other. Milton Friedman in his 1962 book, *Capitalism and Freedom* maintains that the more there are political rights, the more there are economic rights as well. He believes that it is not democracy that impedes economic development – it is government interference that does so. Conventional wisdom looks at the link between democracy and development as a progressive realization of objectives and outcomes – like a hen laying eggs that hatch after a time. Economic development, according to conventional wisdom, creates an entrepreneurial middle class that demands opportunities to grow further, and a certain quality of life, and, more importantly, political freedom. When these are met – even partially – more demands are created, and these new demands lead to more growth and development. The fact that the richest countries of the world are all democratic seems to support conventional wisdom about the reciprocity between democracy and development. Contemporary wisdom, however, views this relationship as complex. It tends to believe that development alone cannot ensure political freedom. Countries like Taiwan, Singapore or Korea – fairly authoritarian by western democratic standards – have indeed shown that they could maintain – even accelerate – the pace of development without ceding control over political institutions and people.

The ‘democracy vs. development’ debate has long persisted along the lines noted above, that is, between those who believe that democracy is a must for development, and those who believe that democracy is not a precondition for development. Samuel Huntington (1975) characterized the sides as ‘compatible’ and ‘conflictual’ respectively.
to spend a substantial part of budgetary allocation to social welfare, which reduces the rate of accumulation. Such socially responsible political agenda often discourages investment. But the compatible theory proponents counter these views by suggesting that the progressive nature of development requires policy choices aimed at making wider distribution of equities, and democratic governments -- because of their participatory nature and links to the grassroots -- can make that distribution possible. Besides, democratic governments are less prone to widespread corruption and are bound by requirements of transparency and accountability, which also put a lid on corruption.

There is a third group which proposes that democracy is neither positive nor negative when it comes to economic development. It suggests that economic development takes place because of the imperatives of the market, which in our time is global, and is rather fluid, and depends a lot on outsourcing. This group believes that development may take place because of or in spite of a government, and democracy doesn’t have to be an essential characteristic of the government.

In recent years however, the compatibility proponents seem to be winning, thanks to theorists like Amartya Sen, and the appearance of violent regimes in different parts of the world. The failed experiment in democracy by George Bush in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of Islamic State, racism and Islamophobia in the west, and the threat to such democracies as US and France from within – both from mainstream and fringe parties, groups and individuals – have necessitated a taking of stock, primarily to find out why democratic principles have failed or are failing to work, and secondarily to find ways to get out of the mess. After Donald Trump won the Republic Party nomination for the 2016 US presidential race, there have been outrages about the failure of US democracy. A Washington Post editorial called Mr. Trump a ‘unique danger’ to democracy (22 July 2016). New York Magazine wrote on 1 May 2016 that ‘America Has Never Been So Ripe for Tyranny.’ Even a pro-rightist Fox TV report on the election suggested that America needs to go back to the basic of democracy. And, coming back to our country, we frequently hear calls for revisiting our constitution and the spirit of the liberation war for retrieving democratic ideals.

What this desire for revisiting the roots of democracy implies is that it is seen as a force that can stop the world’s slide towards chaos and uncertainty because of its inherent capacity to bring the greatest goods for the greatest number of people. It is seen as a force that can counter the rising intolerance and dysfunctionalities of communities, groups and state parties, and can distribute the fruits of development equitably among the wider cross sections of people. The
debate over democracy vs. development thus should be seen through the corrective lens of this new awareness about the functions and benefits of democracy.

However, there is still a nagging uncertainty about forms of democracy – which pares down to selecting good democracy against weak or poorly functioning democracy. While good democracy still remains an ideal, there can be no doubt that even an approximation to the ideal is good enough, given the imperfect world we live in. Recent literature about democracy tells us that ideally, it is seen to be a process rather than an outcome – a process which derives its energy and driving vision from the will of the social collective, and whose dependence on the right social capital leads to inclusiveness and participation. Right democracy is linked to the productive principle of the collective and its ability to bring changes. This translates into productivity of labour and the rise of income and assets. The result is development of the kind that leads to a wider distribution of incomes and assets. This in turn ensures an improvement and continuous upgrading of quality of life with substantial gains in health and well being, social safety and security, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. Development that good democracy achieves is also linked to environmental sustainability and judicious resource use, gender equity and inclusiveness.

If democracy is seen to be intrinsically and instrumentally good, it is so because it facilitates free human choice, and guarantees that community to state activities, as well as policies and public laws conform to the highest norms that their terms of engagement spell out. Democracy also has a built-in component of decentralization – of devolution and grass roots dissemination. It aims at participation at its widest and deepest coordinates. Democracy believes in multiplicity and variety; thus race, ethnicity and gender remain forever in focus. It sustains on its strength to be transparent and accountable, and its ability to resolve conflicts of any scale through dialogue, conversation and consensus.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the debate about democracy and development shifted gear and moved towards the neglected territories of democratic dividends, inclusive development and, with Amartya Sen’s seminal lectures which he published in a book challengingly titled Development as Freedom, development as freedom. Development was no longer seen as a sovereign field unaffected by politics: politics, indeed, of the right kind – which is good democracy-- was seen as an imperative for development. But it was felt that development to be meaningful must be inclusive, so that its fruits can reach even the most marginalized groups. Earlier wisdom considered inclusive development to be pro-poor, with the poor including the
marginalized and disprivileged. It believed that inclusion is a process as well as a goal. An important component of the process was mainstreaming, including and accommodating the broad spectrum of the collective diversity and differences. The goal was defined as emancipation: from a range of restrictions, limitations and disabilities (‘unfreedoms’ according to Amartya Sen).

Earlier wisdom considered development as building capacity of each citizen, particularly those who are excluded, for a productive membership in the collective. It is now seen as resilient development which sustains its dynamism even in recession and ebb times because of the primacy it places on the software component – the people, and not products – and social justice.

There has been a shift in the focus on inclusive development in recent years. Contemporary wisdom tells us that growth can be inclusive even when it is not pro-poor as it can reduce poverty by reducing inequality. Another contemporary assumption is that growth cannot be measured only in terms of the rise of income, but should take into account such factors as reduction in inequality and in improvements in education, health and well being.

This is where Amartya Sen’s development as freedom theory fits in. The five freedoms he advocates as essential for development are – political freedom (human and political rights); economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security. His rights based approach to development has been echoed by Joseph Stiglitz (2000), a former World Bank Chief Economist and a Professor of Columbia University, who believes that development is nothing short of a transformation of society, riding not only on economic growth but also on positive changes in literacy, income distribution and life expectancy. Indeed, when the UN set out its Millennium Development Goals 2015 in 2000, it reiterated the philosophy that development has to be inclusive, and lead to a cluster of freedoms. Thus, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education, gender parity and women’s empowerment, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, ensuring environmental sustainability, human rights and civil society participation are seen to be keys to achieving real value development. Contemporary wisdom considers growth, gender, poverty and environment issues as inseparable – one inherently implies the others.

Inclusiveness thus suggests a range of imperatives that societies need to actualize if they seek growth and development. On a general level, inclusiveness implies the accommodation of diversity – from people to ideas to political and cultural beliefs and practices, and so on. The immediate result is enrichment and dynamism, and a social and political praxis that takes societies from strength to strength.
strength to strength. On advocacy level, inclusiveness means an awareness – a vigilance, if you will – to reach out to anyone who might feel excluded, not simply to those who are excluded. People of disabilities that are not pronounced, ethnic groups that expect to persist with their own lifestyle in their community isolation while retaining a connection with the wider collective, for example. Inclusiveness is of course an old concept. Aristotle, for example talked about “the good of human beings” as the primary aim of political distribution and participation. Inclusiveness, on a theoretical plane, also means developing capability for participation and inclusion, which may range from intellectual to practical to technical. Inclusiveness, is thus an important function of a democratic polity.

Coming to the last component of the paper – accountability – it is important to recognize at the outset that without this vital component neither democracy nor development is ever meaningful in the context of any community or country. Accountability is all about the actor or actors of an initiative, enterprise or activity that aims to deliver public good being responsible for the action taken as well as the outcome. The actor or actors – ranging from community leaders to organizations to state parties must be able to explain, clarify and justify the action taken to everyone’s satisfaction. Accountability also implies that every member of the social/state collective has the right to ask questions and hold the actor/actors to account for their action. In today’s world, policy programmes, dialogues and statements centralize accountability, and the related concept -- transparency.

Democracy presupposes that accountability mechanisms are in place across the board, including each of its arms, organizations, bodies and units. The basic concept of accountability is positioned on a chain of interlinked questions: who is responsible, to whom, about what? According to what norms and standards? What is the process and the outcome of accountability? What are the effects? The right answers to each of the questions will together spell out the accountability mechanisms which function both in a horizontal (in which case an organization has an in-house supervisory mechanism for accountability) and vertical (in which organizations are investigated by outside organizations/actors) matrices. Ideally, accountability mechanisms combine these horizontal and vertical elements. Among the vertical elements are government agencies entrusted with the responsibility for answering accountability as well as bodies like Anti Corruption Commission, different Parliamentary Committees, various watchdog agencies, civil society groups and, increasingly, the media. A measure of accountability is also exercised by opinion polls, public hearings and indeed, periodic elections, which, in a democracy, are the ultimate tests for political parties about their actions and programmes.
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Inclusiveness and accountability indeed have become bottom lines in many of the visionary policies being undertaken by national, regional and world bodies to promote a hunger-free just and peaceful world and meaningful development that is cumulative and sustainable. The aim of MDGs was to reduce extreme poverty by 2015. Among eight of its prominent goals was developing a global partnership for development. The UN believed that through an ‘open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system’ development could be accelerated for addressing not only national, but global development needs. One prerequisite for such a system is transparency, another is inclusiveness, a third is accountability; and a fourth is good governance. Many countries, including Bangladesh, have made spectacular progress towards achieving the MDGs, but where accountability mechanisms have not been developed, or the issue of inclusiveness has not been properly addressed, progress has been really slow and below par.

In September 2015, the UN adopted a set of goals to promote a new sustainable agenda known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The programme of action is an enlarged version of MDGs, and sets 17 targets to be achieved within 2015-2030 timeframe. Prominent among these are:

- Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Making cities and human settlements inclusive
- Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development

It is quite apparent that the world is moving towards inclusiveness, as leaving any group or community from the development agenda makes the realization of programme goals extremely difficult. Worldwide, inclusiveness and accountability are now topping the list of ‘must do’ agendas; and since everyone seems to believe that the system of governance that can guarantee these is

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democracy, the world is increasingly moving towards the ideals enshrined in democracy. In recent years, many once authoritarian states in South America and Africa, democracy has made commendable inroads. Countries like Canada and Sweden have shown how inclusive and accountable democracy can inspire national bonding. Even the once pariah state, Myanmar, is adopting democratic ways of governance, although progress there remains slow. But what this means is that the world is realizing that despite normative, cultural and definitional problem, democracy is seen to be the best option of inclusive governance in a world threatened by armed conflicts, violence and ideological warfares. Democracy, if it works for everyone, is particularly empowered to ensure progress and development.

In a country like Bangladesh which has recently been upgraded from a low income country to a lower middle income country, and is set to graduate into a middle income country in a decade or so, there is no alternative to good democracy, which alone can ensure inclusiveness and accountability – two deciding factors having the greatest impact on how a country is viewed by the outside world as well as by its own citizens. Bangladesh is beset by problems ranging from overpopulation to malnutrition to pervasive corruption, and unless these are tackled with dedication and purpose, we can’t expect spectacular gains. Population, of course, can be turned into a resource, but to do so needs foresight, proper planning and programme implementation – all of which hinge on a culture of best practices. We have crossed important milestones in our journey towards the future, but we need to make development meaningful. That can be done through inculcating democratic values. We need to make inclusiveness, transparency and accountability the cornerstones of our democratic practices.

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All this can be done. A country which came together to fight for independence four decades and a half ago can come together again to achieve what lies very much within our means – turning our democracy into a really good one, making our development inclusive and establishing the primacy of accountability in all our practices.