CGS

Three Decades of Bangladeshi Politics (1990-2019): The Emergence and Collapse of the Political Settlements[1]

Ali Riaz
Illinois State University, USA

Abstract

This paper explores the tumultuous political history of Bangladesh since it embarked on democratization process in 1991 after two decades of civilian and military authoritarianism, using the political settlement framework. Political settlement, in this paper is understood as, an agreement among elites and other social forces regarding 'distribution of benefits supported by its institutions consistent with the distribution of power in the society' (Khan, 2010). At the political level the arrangement is expected to ensure that the system would not unravel by conflict and violence. In the past decades, the country not only experienced repeated episodes of violence but also hopes of a democratic transformation have faded. Bangladesh has moved towards a non-inclusive political system. The paper argues that the period in question is marked by the emergence and collapse of a political settlement among political elites. It explores the nature and scope of the political settlement that emerged in the 1980s and collapsed by 2010, and demonstrates that by 2014, an exclusionary authoritarian settlement has emerged characterized by a lack of inclusivity and coercive apparatuses' heightened role. The breakdown of political settlement was predicated by the nature of the settlement, its implications for the elites in the challenger coalition, and the degree of inclusivity of the dominant coalition. The exclusionary political settlement provides a semblance of

'stability' for a limited period but fails to contain the tension in the long term even when it delivers economic growth.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Political Settlement, State, Inclusivity, Neopatrimonialism.

Introduction

In the past decades, the Bangladeshi political landscape and political system have experienced significant transformations. The political history of the country demonstrates that after two decades of civilian and military authoritarianism (1972-1990), the country embarked on a democratic journey in 1990, when the military regime of General Ershad was deposed through a popular urban uprising. Since then, the country has witnessed the rise and demise of a de facto two-party system. While until 2008 the state power alternated between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) through elections, the past decade saw the uninterrupted rule of the AL, thanks to two controversial elections in 2014 and 2018; notably, since 2016 scholars and analysts have warned of gradual descend of the country towards authoritarianism (STAFFOR, 2016; The Economist, 2018). The 2018 election has not only been described by international media as "farcical" (New York Times, 2019) but the analysts also insist that the country has entered into a "dangerous new era" (Kugelman, 2019) Since the beginning of the democratic era, Bangladesh's economy has expanded and the structure of the economy has changed. It has reportedly experienced remarkable and continual economic growth and attained substantial success in social indicators of development. These have taken place irrespective of regimes and despite overall poor governance. In the political realm, the acrimonious relationship and belligerent discourses among the two major parties and their leaders, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina of the BNP and the AL respectively, indicated a deep-seated schism resulting in periodic violence. Yet, the country was muddling through while regular elections provided a semblance of stability. A spoils distribution system where political elites of two parties share gains emerged and was maintained. Political developments since 2009 show a gradual erosion of, and later a complete departure from, the political settlement. This paper attempts to explain this transfiguration of Bangladeshi politics and its journey towards a 'one-party state' (Aljazeera, 2019: Bangkok Post, 2019).

This paper argues that the current crisis of Bangladeshi politics is a result of the breakdown of the political settlement among the political elites which emerged during the 1990s. It delves into various components of the political settlement and explores the causes and conditions for its collapse. The paper has two objectives: first, to explain Bangladesh's current political crisis within the existing framework of its political settlement and, secondly, to contribute to the emerging literature on political settlement, which underscores the need and ways of building the settlement while only seldom exploring what causes the demise of an already existing and /or emerging settlement.

The paper is premised on the understanding that the stability of a social order depends on forging as well as retaining a political settlement, that is, an agreement among elites and other social forces with regard to "distribution of benefits supported by its institutions consistent with the distribution of power in the society" (Khan, 2010). At the political level, the arrangement is expected to ensure that the system would not unravel by conflict and violence, or in other words, to ensure that politics does not become a 'deadly, warlike affair' (Higley & Burton, 1998).

What is a Political Settlement?

Although the term 'political settlement' has been in use since the early 1990s (Melling, 1991) it gained salience in recent years, thanks to the seminal contribution of Mushtaq Khan, who has described political settlement as *'a combination of power and institutions that is mutually compatible and also sustainable in*

terms of economic and political viability' (Khan, 2010: 4. Emphasis in original).

Authors and organizations have offered different definitions of the concept. For example, the DFID document has defined political settlements as

> the expression of a common understanding, usually forged between elites, about how power is organised and exercised. They include formal institutions for managing political and economic relations, such as electoral processes, peace agreements, parliaments, constitutions and market regulations. But they also include informal, often unarticulated agreements that underpin a political system, such as deals between elites on the division of spoils (DFID, 2010: 22).

As noted by the DFID, a political settlement not only includes formal institutions but also, and perhaps more importantly, informal institutions. Khan (2010), Menocal (2015: 2) and OECD (2011: 31) have also emphasized the role of informal institutions, which includes, "the informal rules, shared understandings and rooted habits that shape political interaction and conduct" (Ibid).

In the past decades, the term is used for both a process of reaching a settlmemnt by political means (Gaddis, 1986) and a political outcome of a negotiated settlement (Hannon, 1967). Discussions, particularly policy documents, have also highlighted two dimensions of political settlements: "the fixed outcome of a certain historical event, and a particular characteristic or property of a society, reflected in the conduct of political actors" (OECD, 2009, Quoted in Parks, 2010: 5) In this paper the concept is largely used in the latter sense.

There is no archetypical model of a political settlement; instead, depending on the goals and actors, different types of political settlements emerge at different times. These include negotiated settlements, informal elite pacts, imposed settlements, entrenched settlements and inclusive settlements (DFID, 2010: 23). Two are pertinent for our discussions; they are - informal elite pacts and inclusive settlements. The former refers to "uneasy arrangements between elites that find accommodation through the brokering of interests" (Ibid). These kinds of arrangements/settlements usually have an inherent possibility to stagnate and continue to bear the marks of fragility. The latter 'extends to a long-term negotiation between the state and groups in society. Societal rights and responsibilities are broadly accepted. It evolves and is responsive to public expectations' (Ibid). The informal elite pacts, which remain very fragile, can be transformed into inclusive political settlements over time through changes in political culture, institutional changes – that is changes in the state institutions, the political parties and the involvement of the civil society. As for Bangladesh, the almost decade long movement for democracy in the 1980s had facilitated an informal elite pact.

The political settlements among the elites encompass at least three dimensions: political, economic and social (Hasan, 2013). Notwithstanding the intertwined relationships between these three domains, in this paper, the governance dimension is examined. The aim is to show that how the political settlement in the 1990s created a conducive environment for electoral democracy and how a gradual decline and eventual collapse has resulted in a shift towards a hybrid regime (see Riaz, 2019).
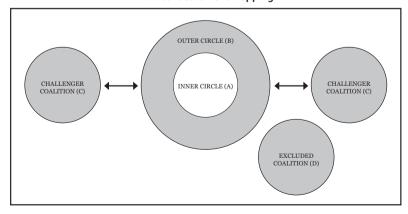
Mapping the Actors of Political Settlements

In any political settlement, broadly two sets of actors are prominent: the dominant coalition and a challenger coalition(s). Usually, a third set of actors are also present: the excluded coalition/ groups.

A dominant coalition controls and exercises power and plays a pivotal role in distributing benefits and ensuring order in society. A dominant coalition, by definition, comprises various actors of society. While the dominant coalition consists of two layers - an inner circle and an outer circle, the members of the former have

more access to resources and are instrumental in defining the conditions of its relationship with members of both the outer circle and those outside the dominant coalition. The challenger coalitions are those which aspire to be dominant and as the dominant coalition, are a conglomeration of various groups and factions.

A political settlement, in large measure, includes an agreement about the relationship between the dominant coalition and the challenger coalitions. These actors have agreed to participate in the socio-economic-political system. Following is a template of mapping actors in any society (Figure 1). Although the figure highlights the elites, it does not suggest that populations are excluded from the socio-political landscape; instead, each layer of the dominant coalition and the challenger coalition have various segments of the population within their circles. If the relationships between these coalitions are contemplated as horizontal, each elite group is connected to the population in vertical manners through a complex web. Segments of the population are not autonomous of each other but interlinked by interests and other ways (for example, familial relationship, spatial proximity, etc). These relationships are not static; they are redefined and renegotiated through cooperation and contestations as are the relationships between the dominant and the challenger coalitions.

Figure 1:
Political Settlement Mapping

How are Political Settlements Maintained?

Political settlements with different characteristics have different modes of maintenance. But taken together we can recognize that political settlements are maintained through one or more of three ways: coercion, cooptation and building legitimacy.

The issue of 'legitimacy' is far more complex than the two other factors. Legitimacy is central to the emergence and durability of any political settlement. Parks recognized the importance of legitimacy: "ultimately the most important for the long-term viability of a political settlement, is through building and maintaining the legitimacy of state institutions established and shaped through the political settlement" (Parks, 2010: 11). Unfortunately, he has only focused on the legitimacy of state institutions. This is the common pattern of discussions by most researchers and policymakers. While explaining, Parks incorporated the notion of performance legitimacy. Parks writes:

> State legitimacy may be derived from any of several different sources, including traditional authority of leadership (Thailand), capability to defend against external enemies (South Korea), protection from violent internal threats (Sri Lanka), or electoral mandate (India and Indonesia). Perhaps most important is legitimacy based on the ability of the state to deliver economic growth and steady improvements in quality of life. While other forms of legitimacy remain important, "developmental legitimacy" is becoming increasingly important in Asia. This trend has important implications for the behavior of ruling coalitions and the durability of the political settlements on which they rest (Ibid. Emphasis added).

Certainly, three dimensions of state are essential prerequisites of any political settlement to be in place and sustained; they are capacity, authority and legitimacy. In this instance, capacity

means the ability of the state to provide basic services and maintain the status quo; authority means the ability of state institutions to exercise their powers; and legitimacy means acceptance among the elites and citizens that the rules regulating the exercise of power are proper and finding for all concerned, on the one hand and international recognition of a state with a defined boundary, on the other.

This notion of state has a distinct institutional bias. The state is viewed as a conglomeration of apparatuses, power and authority. It is argued here that the role of the state as a social actor must be added, particularly in the context of non-Western societies, and that we need to underscore that the state is also an agent of hegemony and a source of ideology. The legitimacy of the state, therefore, is not only providing tangible goods or merely a matter of juridico-legal recognition, but an acceptance of the ideology of the state by a larger populace (Riaz, 2010).

In the context of political settlement, the legitimacy of the actors, particularly of the dominancy coalition, is extraordinarily important. Simply stated, it is suggested that elites must have the legitimacy to be viewed as a representative of the citizens to reach an agreement with other actors. This is what Gramsci has referred to as 'hegemony.' From the Gramscian point of view, hegemony is tied to the material base of the dominant class: "position and function in the world of production" (Gramsci, 1971: 12). But it is not merely material, it is also a politics of moral and intellectual leadership. To assert its hegemony, the ruling class must be able to defend its own corporate interests by universalizing them, by ensuring that these interests can at least apparently "become the interests of the [...] subordinate groups" (Ibid, 181).

As such, the viability and stability of political settlements are also contingent upon the legitimacy of the state and its elites. Without material dominance and intellectual and moral leadership over society, the success of elites in persuading citizens to subscribe to a political settlement and accept that the agreements are just, proper, and legitimate is slim.

Political Settlement in Bangladesh: 1972-1990

The first two decades of Bangladesh's independent existence have been characterized by an authoritarian system of governance–civil and military. The latter had been in power longer than the civilian political elites, but had successfully coopted a section of the civilian political elites and bureaucrats to pursue its economic and political agenda.

The absence of any political settlement marks the first three and a half years of independence. This was due to two factors: first, the absence of a strong group of political elites outside the governing political party, the Awami League (AL), thus making the AL the only platform of the elites and it felt no need to build a settlement with any other groups. The lack of capitalist development in colonial East Pakistan precluded the rise of a bourgeoisie; instead, intermediate classes2 became the prominent socio-political actors and were represented by the AL. Secondly, excluded groups, for example, the civil bureaucracy and the military, failed to become a coherent challenger coalition.
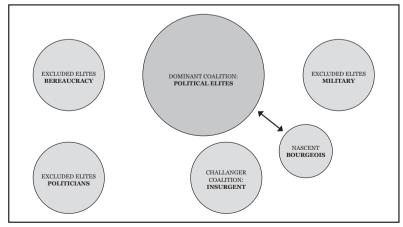
The AL, despite being the 'dominant coalition' was internally fractured as it represented disparate groups. Contestation between these groups weakened the capacity of the coalition at a time when the emergent Bangladeshi state was feeble due to the War of Independence and shortage of human resources capable of running a government of the nation-state. Yet, the dominant coalition increasingly relied on the bureaucracy to maintain stability and provide services to the citizens. It was done without coopting the bureaucracy into the dominant coalition. As the law and order deteriorated, especially with clandestine insurgent groups gaining lethal capacity, the ruling coalition used police, paramilitary and military forces to subdue the revelious groups. They remain outside the ambit of the dominant coalition as excluded groups.

Economic policies of the dominant coalition, for example, nationalization of industries, limiting of capitalist development, unbridled corruption, and primitive accumulation facilitated the

rise of a nascent capitalist class, which wanted 'a piece of the pie' of state power. Although this class was closely connected to the ruling coalition, it was not included per se in the dominant coalition. This put the nascent capitalists outside the circle of the dominant coalition but not as a challenger coalition, because it didn't aspire to be the sole claimant of the political power but wanted to be coopted into the dominant coalition.

Evidently, the dominant coalition was highly exclusionary and, consequently, the political situation remained volatile. Notwithstanding the populist appeal of the regime, a political settlement that ensures "the distribution of benefits supported by its institutions consistent with the distribution of power in society" (Khan, 2010) was absent. The ruling coalition adopted authoritarian measures to address the crisis and imposed a political settlement by way of founding a one-party state in January 1975. The failure of the dominant coalition to impose a political settlement is not only tied to the absence of (or its inability to develop) institutions, but importantly to the absence of the ideological hegemony of the ruling dominant political elites. Both domestic and external developments also contributed to the failure of the dominant coalition to this effect.

Figure 2: Bangladesh 1972-75
Absence of a Political Settlement: An Intermediate State

With the military coup in 1975, not only was the AL removed from power, but the entire power bloc was reconfigured. New elite political settlements emerged. In the period between 1975 and 1982, during the Ziaur Rahman regime, a dominant coalition was founded with military and civilian bureaucracy in the inner circle while political and business elites were co-opted to be a part of the ruling coalition, albeit as members of the outer circle. Civilianization of the regime and the need to tap into the network of clients prompted the establishment of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This created the 'patrimonial administrative state' which is characterized by an environment within which the business elites can engage in rampant rent-seeking and political elites can strengthen the clientelist networks. The state not only remained the source of the dispensation of patronage but also emerged as the agency of hegemony. The ideological terrain was reshaped (see, Riaz, 2005). Despite creating a broad alliance of political forces under the new party, comprising individuals and organizations from far left to far right, including those who once opposed the founding of the country, the inner circle of the dominant coalition remained exclusionary, on the one hand, and fractious, on the other. The excluded political elites coalesced as a challenger coalition too (Figure 3). The nature of the state and polity remained unchanged under the military rule of H M Ershad (1982-1990), but with a slight variation: more challenger coalitions of political elites and student activist bodies emerged as excluded groups (Figure 4). The challenger coalitions were far from homogenous and were antagonistic to each other. However, the students' groups served as the bridge between the challenger coalitions.

The system under military regimes was a combination of an imposed settlement and an informal elite pact. The imposed part of the settlement was ideological, on the one hand, and relating to the system of governance, on the other; the informal pact was based on the question of economic and social policies. There was a consensus among the elites across the board on the issues of the

adoption and continuation of the market economy, economic liberalization and integration with the global economy and global supply chain. Broadly speaking, capitalist economic policies for economic growth and development, implementing structural adjustment programs (SAPs), and the role of the country as a supplier within the larger global political economy, were accepted as the path forward.

Figure 3:
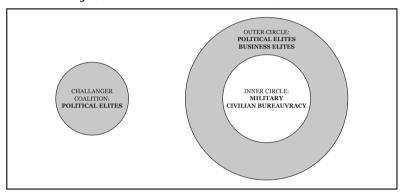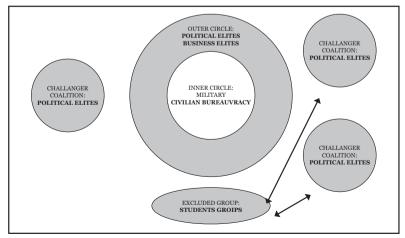**Bangladesh 1975-82: The Patrimonial Administrative State-1**

Figure 4:
Bangladesh 1982-1990: The Patrimonial Administrative State-2

However, the fragility of the settlement remained due to the lack of political and moral legitimacy of the dominant coalition, and the absence of hegemony of any political ideology, particularly on the issues of national identity and the role of religion in the public sphere. These issues were overshadowed by the immediate question of governance, demanding inclusivity and representation. In the 1982-1990 era, under General Ershad, diverse challenger coalitions surfaced, which included the members of the previous dominant coalition.

Political Settlement in Bangladesh: post-1990

Political developments in Bangladesh since 1990 show that the country has witnessed the emergence of an inclusive political settlement, followed by a breakdown in 2006, an effort to impose an exclusionary settlement for two years and then collapse of the settlement and the emergence of a different exclusionary political settlement with new actors in the inner circle.

The central issues of the 1990 popular urban uprising were the political representation and inclusion of political elites not connected to the military in the dominant coalition. The political elites who were at the helm of power were removed because a fissure between the inner circle and the outer circle (between political elites, on the one hand, and the military and civilian bureaucracy, on the other) appeared and the members of the inner circle withdrew support for the regime.3 The global wave of democracy also facilitated the change. The most critical element of the elite settlement was the question of 'orderly regime succession.'

The political settlement that emerged post-1990 had three unique characteristics; first, there were written documents testifying to the agreement, secondly, it became inclusive of non-political elites, and thirdly, elite settlement tacitly included a role for citizens.

Save an engineered settlement, which is explicitly negotiated to end a conflict, elite settlements are usually unwritten and not

codified in any documents. But Bangladesh is an exception as the political settlement among the political elites is reflected in three documents. The first is the joint announcement of three pro-democracy alliances and supported by the largest Islamist party, signed on 19 November 1990, which made promises of instituting a caretaker government to oversee the elections, ensuring fair elections, independence of the judiciary and the freedom of the press, to name a few. The second document--the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution, unanimously passed on 10th August (became effective on 18 September 1991 after approval through a referendum) reintroduced the parliamentary system of governance. The third document is the Thirteenth amendment of the Constitution, passed on 26 March 1996 which incorporated the caretaker proviso in the Constitution as a system of regime succession. Although adopted by a parliament elected through a sham election, boycotted by all opposition parties, it was a result of the demand of the opposition.

The second element is the inclusion of the business elites within the inner circle of the dominant coalition while military and civilian bureaucracy remained within the outer circle of the dominant coalition (Figure 6). The growing strength of business elites is reflected in two ways. First, the number of business elites becoming members of the parliament. The first parliament of the country elected in 1973 had 13 percent members from among businessmen and industrialists. By the seventh (1996), eighth (2001) and ninth (2008) parliaments the share of businessmen in the parliament had reached 48 percent, 51 percent, and 63 percent, respectively (Liton, 2015). Secondly, business associations began to play a heightened political role while the actions of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) during the period, mainly since the political crisis in 1994, is a case in point (Kochanek, 1996).

Apparently, the political settlement brought the elites together, shaped an agreement on the system of governance, regime transition and continuation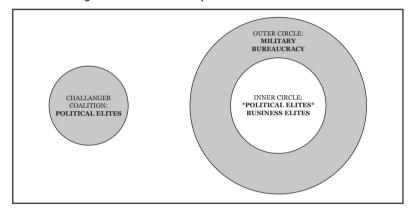 of economic policies, which delivered continued economic growth to create enough rent to share the spoils of the system. This settlement, however, produced a system that was inimical to building institutions. Democracy was hollowed out due to the absence of accountability and was bereft of substantive elements such as human rights. The economic system that delivered growth also created an environment of widespread corruption and cronyism. The political settlement resulted in a neo-patrimonial system:

> a combination of two types of political domination: patrimonial and legal-rational bureaucratic domination. In neo-patrimonial regimes, the chief executive exercises unlimited and incalculable powers as far as they can, as a form not of public service but of private property through personal patronage rather than through ideology or law. Relationships with others likewise fall into the patrimonial pattern of vassal and lord, rather than the rational-legal one of subordinate and superior, and behavior is correspondingly calculated to reflect personal status, rather than to perform an official function" (Islam, 2013: 151) (Figure 5).

This explains why, despite the incessant acrimony between the two major parties, the system of dysfunctional democracy continued and succeeded in generating economic growth. Both parties were committed to maintaining the status quo at the systemic level. The elections, particularly fair elections under neutral caretaker administrations, provided legitimacy to the political settlement and made any challenge to the system from outside the elites very unlikely. The legitimacy of the system was crucial in ensuring its continuation, and the elections provided that. Elections at regular intervals also ensured distribution of the spoils of the system among the elites – political and other, although the distribution may not have been always consistent with their respective power within the society. Non-elites became factors in the settlement. With regular free elections, citizens became important elements in

the considerations of the political elites. Equally important has been the proliferation of civil society organizations of various kinds, which provided space for participation. The media enjoyed some degree of freedom and acted as a forum for accountability.

Figure 5:
Bangladesh 1990-2006: Neo-patrimonial Political Settlement

The continued economic growth and relatively stable order masked the lack of embeddedness of this political settlement. Gradually, the signs of erosion of this arrangement crept in. The trust deficit among the BNP and the AL, which prompted the introduction of the caretaker government and periodically engulfed them in bitter fights, began to increase. The functionality of the institutions was further weakened due to the politicization of administration and law enforcement agencies on partisan line. But it was the assassination attempt of then opposition leader Sheikh Hasina in a public rally in 2004 and the BNP government's unwillingness to investigate the incident that became a major marker of the erosion. The failed cover-up effort made the ruling BNP the prime suspect in the eyes of the AL.

It is against this backdrop that the political crisis of 2006 ensued, on the issue of the head of the caretaker government for conducting general elections. It laid bare the absence of institutions, the culture

of a zero-sum game, and the lack of embeddedness of the political settlement. The ruling BNP's manipulation of the Constitution with regard to the head of the caretaker government, the composition of the Election Commission, the voter roll in addition to the politicization of the civilian bureaucracy, created an impasse. These, in combination with the intransigent attitude of the AL, brought the entire system to a halt. The intense engagement of the representatives of external powers to bring the parties together showed their concern for long-term instability, but it also was testimony to the absence of institutions that remained above the partisan divide. The long fifteen years of acrimonious bi-partisan politics had left no space for mediation from within. The political settlement was eroding expeditiously, heading for a breakdown and eventual collapse. This raises the question as to why political settlement collapses, particularly when it delivers economic growth and a semblance of stability.

Why Political Settlement Collapses?

Political settlements do not collapse spectacularly, it is a process in which it weakens, and gradually erodes slowly and eventually becomes non-existent. Socio-political instability is a clear marker of the absence, weakening, or the demise of a political settlement. However, we must exercise caution in determining what constitutes 'political instability.' Limited-scale instability, which does not challenge the fundamental elements of the order, does not represent the weakening and/or collapse of the settlement, although it might expose the fissures and faults. Therefore, distinctions must be made between 'regime change', 'change in political settlement' and 'collapse of settlement.' In societies where strong institutions are wanting, it is indeed possible, perhaps likely, that political and social forces will use extralegal measures such as street agitations to safeguard their perceived share of benefits or power. These can be ex ante or ex post-facto. But they should not be confused with efforts to terminate the settlement. "A stable political settlement is one with relatively predictable

patterns of political behavior over time, even if there is frequent and even violent contestation between elites over dominant positions of power" (Parks, 2010: 12). This is a situation which is described by Ingram (2014:8) as "the actors change, but the script and the set design do not."

The available literature on political settlement has not rigorously addressed the issue of the breakdown of political settlement. The lacuna is primarily due to the focus of these studies. Most of them have either explained the contour of existing political settlements or the modus operandi of building political settlements, particularly as a part of the state-building process or achieving economic growth in developing societies. Researchers have seldom examined as to what are the causes of and conditions for the unraveling of political settlements are and their political implications. Yet, we can extrapolate their arguments to gather a preliminary outline of the conditions for collapse and add our observations in this regard.

An extant political settlement is likely to collapse and instability to ensue, if and when

1. the nature of the dominant coalition becomes increasingly exclusionary;

2. the ruling coalition "leverages administrative power to keep the opposition permanently excluded" (Khan, 2012: 36).

3. the "powerful groups [get] a distribution of benefits that is too low given their relative power" (Khan, 2010: 4) or they perceive of an emergence of a new settlement that does not reflect their perceived power;

4. the economic situation deteriorates, either due to an external shock or as a result of the failure of ongoing policies, constraining rent-seeking opportunities;

5. a discontinuous change in the organization of power and power relations takes place;

6. the dominant coalition's legitimacy, either legal or moral, becomes questionable.

This is neither an exhaustive list nor are these conditions exclusive. Equally important to note is that not all are required for a breakdown. They can act in various combinations. Time and situation determine the primacy of the conditions described above.

In Bangladesh, there have been various instances where one or more factors have exposed the fault lines of the existing political settlement and resulted in periodic violence. For example, in late 1995, the ruling BNP declined to accept the demand of the AL for the inclusion of the CTG proviso in the Constitution, but it was compelled after street agitation in March 1996. This episode revealed the difficulty in arriving at a settlement, which would ensure an equilibrium. The periodic outbreak of political violence between March 1996 and October 2006 is indicative of the fragility of the settlement, but the efforts of the BNP to manipulate the Constitution and rig the election sent a message that the dominant coalition is about to change the fundamental rules of the game. The 2006 political impasse alarmed the AL that the forthcoming election will bring about a change in the organization of power, which is incompatible with the latter's relative power and that such change will limit the benefits the challenger coalition enjoyed under the existing system.

Imposed Settlement Fails: 2007-2008

The crisis of 2006 led to the intervention of the military in January 2007, albeit under the façade of a technocratic caretaker government, and precluded any change the BNP might have planned. Although the intervention was abrupt, apparently with no longstanding plan, the new regime immediately formulated a contingency plan and laid out measures for effecting a set of 'reforms frogrammes'.

The 2007 intervention of the military was a textbook situation that exemplifies the change of political settlement. Parks' list of drivers of change in political settlements include situations when "a state
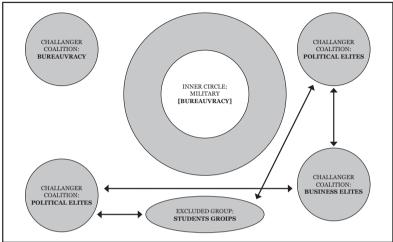
agency becomes powerful and independent of the [extant] settlement" (Parks, 2010: 12). The interregnum, by choice or by default, challenged the neo-patrimonial arrangement. Although for want of a better expression, we will describe the regime as the dominant coalition, it was all but one. The military was in the inner circle with the lukewarm support from the civilian bureaucracy. There was no outer circle to refer to, whereas various challenger coalitions emerged, from the disgruntled political elites to business elites to bureaucratic elites (Figure 6). The regime had destabilized the status quo and alienated almost all beneficiaries of the extant settlement. The initial support from the AL for the interim regime soon faded as the party's leadership realized the potential threat of a systemic change undermining their social power and reshaping the institutions which deliver benefits.

It is safe to say that the regime intended to impose a new political settlement, but only in vain. Neo-patrimonial structure was challenged but an alternative was yet to be offered. It was a grim reminder of Machiavelli: "there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new" (Machiavelli, 1999: 19). The exclusionary nature of the settlement, without any buy-in from political elites, and support from the civil society, precluded the proposed settlement from coming to fruition.

Collapse of the Old Settlement and the Emergence of a New: 2009-2019

The abject failure of the military to impose an exclusionary settlement occupying the inner circle of the dominant collation with no partners also offered a clean slate to the political elites; either they could return to 'business-as-usual' or forge a new settlement. The 2008 election, won by the AL with a landslide majority, provided an impression that it restored the status quo: a

Figure 6:
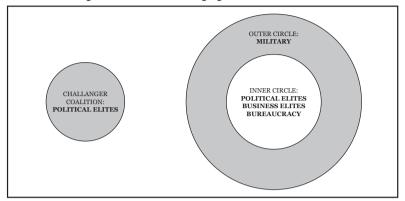**Bangladesh 2007-2008: Proposed Imposed Settlment**

two-party spoils system was back. A combination of political elites, business elites and the bureaucracy were in the inner circle with the military in the outer circle; it was somewhat different from any previous era. A challenger coalition was present with political elites as the core of it that provided an outlet for oppositional politics and the semblance of order (Figure 7). Rapidly, the dominant coalition began to become more exclusionary as partyarchy, a democratic political system in which "political parties monopolize the formal political process and politicize society along party lines" (Coppedge, 1994: 18) becomes the order of the day.[4]

The order that we witnessed at that time, was not a result of a 'political settlement' among the elites, and between elites and the citizens. Removal of the constitutional proviso of the caretaker government (CTG) to oversee the general election marked a serious departure from the elite pact. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution removed the foundation of the elite pact: a peaceful regime transition mechanism.

The results of the elections held since independence showed that

Figure 7:
Bangladesh 2009-2013 Emerging New Political Settlement

opposition could win only when a non-partisan technocratic caretaker government oversaw the election. The 15th amendment to the Constitution was intended to benefit the incumbent. The controversial election of 2014, which was boycotted by all opposition parties including the BNP, delivered an overwhelming 'victory' to the AL and a parliament with no opposition.[5]

The violence in the wake of the election and on its first anniversary not only mark bloody episodes in the political history of Bangladesh, but importantly represent a spectacular demonstration of the collapse of an apparent political settlement that emerged in 1991, remained uninterrupted until 2006, and muddled through between 2009 and 2013. With the passage of the time, it became evident that the 2014 election with the lowest voter turnout in the history of the nation was the most consequential election to date.

In continuation of the political strategy pursued since 2012, the ruling party adopted further authoritarian measures after the election to marginalize the excluded political elites. It has reshaped the political landscape and refashioned the dominant coalition; which may be described as an 'exclusionary authoritarian coalition' (Figure 8). The overreliance on coercion

has made the coercive apparatuses of the state a significant constitutive element of the dominant coalition. The coalition comprises political elites and military and law enforcement agencies in the inner circle, while business elites and bureaucracy are located in the outer circle. Thanks to the defining characteristics of neo-patrimonialism - personalization of power - the Prime Minister enjoys unrestrained power within the coalition. The absence of a formidable challenger coalition, the nonexistence of parliamentary opposition and the prevailing partyarchy, has weakened the civil society.

Although the 2018 election was participated in by all political parties, it was destined to deliver a victory, due to the various strategies adopted by the AL to manipulate the electoral process (For an explanation, see Riaz, 2019). During the process, the role of the law enforcement agencies, civil administration, election commission and the ruling party demonstrated that the line between the state and the party has practically disappeared. The dependence on the coercive apparatuses such as police, military and Rapid Action Battalion signaled a new settlement, in which the dominant coalition's inner circle comprised of the military/law enforcement agencies and the political elites belonging to the AL. During the election, all these institutions worked in unison to protect the dominant coalition.

Figure 8: Exclusionary Authoritarian Settlement, 2014

Stability-Inclusivity Nexus

Political settlements are meant to offer order in society and an ideal political settlement will be inclusive of a wide range of forces. But not all settlements offer inclusivity. Similarly, different kinds of settlements enjoy different degrees of stability. The relationship between these two dimensions, at the theoretical level, can be understood by placing these two by two axes; stability along the vertical axis and inclusivity along the horizontal axis (Figure 9).

Based on our discussion above, the following diagram presents the Bangladesh scene. It is evident that the settlements' range of inclusivity and degree of stability have varied remarkably (Figure 11). It is also noticeable that the country's journey has been tumultuous and there were quite a few reversals both in terms of stability and inclusivity. Furthermore, an obvious and simple finding is that the less inclusive settlements tend to face more volatility.
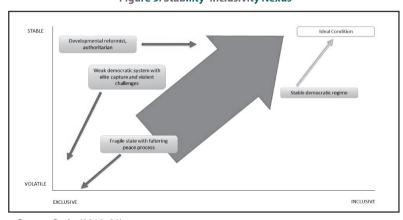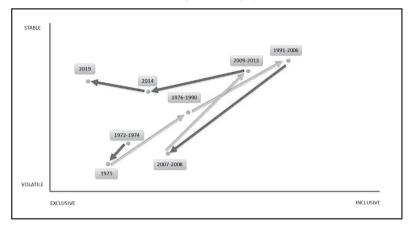
Figure 9: Stability-Inclusivity Nexus

Source: Parks (2010: 30)

Figure 10: Bangladeshi Political Settlements and Stability-Inclusivity Spectra

Conclusion

Agreement among and between elites and other social groups is a prerequisite for social order. But a political settlement is neither static nor path-dependent; instead, it is dynamic and changes for various reasons. There can be different types of political settlements, and actors can vary. A political settlement can and does erode, breakdown and eventually collapse. The process of the collapse of a political settlement is less spectacular than it sounds. Seldom can a single event be identified as the moment of collapse of the settlement among political elites, and between elites and other groups; often it takes place incrementally. Progressive attenuation of powers of various actors, especially of political elites of the challenger coalition, a tangible imbalance between institutions of coercion and cooptation in favor of the former, and instances of muzzling of dissent are indicative of the trajectory. Besides, there is no linearity to the process. As such, the erosion can be ignored as 'a slightly worse situation than yesteryear' and the relatively eroded stage can be accepted as the 'new normal.' But there are signposts of erosion and pathways of spiraling down to collapse.

The Bangladeshi case shows how precursors of collapse were palpable. The descent of politics into a 'deadly, warlike situation' characterized by incessant acrimony between elites on systemic issues, intransigency of dominant coalition reciprocated by challenger coalition on almost all fronts, binarization of politics (i,e., creation of division within the society), and naturalization of violence in the discursive arena were easily discernable.

The new political settlement that has emerged in Bangladesh in the past decade is characterized by its lack of inclusivity and the heightened role of the coercive apparatuses within not only the dominant coalition but also within the inner circle. This has previously contributed and now continues to contribute to the decline of the legitimacy of the dominant coalition. The controversial elections in 2014 and 2018 have robbed the dominant coalition's moral legitimacy, although it can claim juridico-legal legitimacy. The wanton use of state-machinery to persecute the opposition, decimate civil society and impose restrictions on the media are indicative of the trajectory of the system. The post-2018 election offers a semblance of stability, akin to authoritarian stability, thanks to the absence of a formidable challenging coalition, but this path has also moved the system away from inclusivity – a requirement for a durable and orderly system which can offer equitable economic growth.

Notes

1. Earlier versions of the paper were presented at the International Political Science (IPSA), 24th World Congress of Political Science in Poznan, Poland, July 23-28, 2016, and American Institute of Bangladesh Studies Symposium, 'Bangladesh's Recent Past and Imminent Future: Commemorating 30 Years of AIBS', October 17, 2019, Wisconsin, USA.

2. The concept of Intermediate classes was developed by Gramsci (1979) and Kalecki (1976) and used by Raj (1973). Ahmad (1985), further developed the concept in the context of developing. In the context of Bangladesh, it has been employed by Sobhan and Ahmad (1980). In this context, I have used Ahmad's (1985:44 summarization as the guide: "Small landowners, rich and middle peasants, the merchants of rural and semi-rural townships, small-scale manufacturers, retailers, and so on, are included here among the intermediate and auxiliary classes. The professional petty bourgeoisie has arisen mainly from these classes and shares many of the same interests and attitudes." For further explanation of the relevance of the concept and its applicability to Bangladesh, see Riaz (2005).

3. In early December 1990, the Divisional Commissioner of Dhaka and the Chief of Army declined to protect the regime of H M Ershad; the regime had lost the core support base while it didn't have a corps of strong political elites supporting its continuation.

4. For a discussion on the partyarchy in Bangladesh, see BRAC (2014).

5. For events leading to and during the 2014 election, see Riaz (2014).

References

Ahmad, A. (1985). 'Class, Nation and State: Intermediate Classes in Peripheral Societies' in D. L. Johnson ed., *Middle Classes in Dependent Societies,* London: Sage.

Aljazeera (2019). 'Is Bangladesh a one-party state? https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/headtohead/2019/02/gowher-rizvi-bangladesh-party-state-190227124251797.html;

Bangkok Post (2019). 'Bangladesh returns to 1-party state', https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1604438/bangladesh-returns-to-1-party-state.

BRAC (2014). *The State of Governance Bangladesh 2013: Democracy Party Politics*, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, Dhaka: BRAC University.

Coppedge, M. (1994). *Strong Parties and Lame Ducks*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

DFID (2010). *Building Peaceful States and Societies*. DFID Practice Paper. London: Department for International Development.

Economist, The (2018). 'Bangladesh's slide towards authoritarianism is accelerating.'

https://www.economist.com/asia/2018/10/04/bangladeshs-slide -towards-authoritarianism-is-accelerating

Gaddis, J. (1986). 'The long peace: Elements of stability in the postwar international system.' *International Security* 10(4): 99-142.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from Prison Notebooks*. New York: International General.

Gramsci, A. (1979). *Selections from Political Writings 1921-26*. Translated and edited by Q. Hoare. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Hannon, J. (1967). 'A political settlement for Vietnam: The 1954 Geneva Conference and its current implications' *Virginia Journal of International Law,* 8(4): 4-93.

Hasan, M. (2013). 'The political settlement in a limited access order: The case of Bangladesh'. *ESID Working Paper* No. 23. Manchester: University of Manchester.

Higley, J. and M. Burton (1998). 'Elite Settlements and the Taming of Politics,' *Government and Opposition* 33 (1): 98-115.

Ingram, S. (2014). 'Political settlements: The history of an idea in policy and theory,' *SSGM Discussion Paper* 2014/15, Canberra:

College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National university, available at http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/DP-2014-5-Ingram-ONLINE.pdf (accessed 10 July 2016).

Islam, M.M. (2013). 'The toxic politics of Bangladesh: A bipolar competitive neopatrimonial state?' *Asian Journal of Political Science,* 21 (2): 148-168.

Kalecki, M. (1976). *Essays on Developing Economics,* Hancock: Harvester Press.

Khan, M. (2010). 'Political Settlement and the Governance of Growth-Enhancing Institutions', July. http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/9968/1/Political_Settlements_internet.pdf

Khan, M. (2012). 'The political economy of inclusive growth' in L. de Mello and M. A. Dutz eds., *Promoting Inclusive Growth: Challenges and Policie.,* Paris: OECD Publishing, pp. 15-54.

Kochanek, S.A. (1996). 'The rise of interest politics in Bangladesh,' Asian Survey, 36 (7): 704-722.

Kugelman, M. (2019). 'A disputed election and a dangerous new era for Bangladesh's politics', CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/01/opinions/bangladesh-election-oped-intl/index.html

Liton, S. (2015). 'Business factor in our politics', The Daily Star, 14 October. http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/business-factor-our-politics-156688

Macchaivelli, N. (1999). *The Prince. London:* Penguin, [1516].

Melling, J. (1991). 'Industrial capitalism and the welfare of the state: The role of employers in the comparative development of the welfare state: a review of recent research,' *Sociology* 91(2): 219-39.

Menocal, A.R. (2015). *Inclusive Political Settlements: Evidence, Gaps and Challenges of Institutional Transformation.* Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, University of Birmingham.

New York Times (2019). Bangladesh's Farcial Vote, New York Times, 14 January. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/opinion/editorials/bangladesh-election-sheikh-hasina.html.

OECD (2009). 'Room Document 3: Framing paper on political settlements in peacebuilding and statebuilding.' Quoted in Parks, T. 'Political Settlements: Implications for International Development Policy and Practice,' *Asia Foundation Occasional Paper* No. 2, New York: Asia Foundation.

OECD (2011). *Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility: Policy Guidance*. DAC Guidelines and Reference Series. OECD Publishing.

Parks, T. (2010). 'Political Settlements: Implications for International Development Policy and Practice,' Asia Foundation Occasional paper no. 2, July 201, New York: Asia Foundation, 2010, p. 12.

Raj, K. N. (1973). 'The Politics and Economics of Intermediate Regimes,' *Economic and Political Weekly,* 8:27.

Riaz, A. (2005). *Unfolding State: The Transformation of Bangladesh,* Ontario, Canada: de Sitters Publications.

Riaz, A. (2010) 'Bangladesh: A "weak state" with multiple security challenges' in T. V. Paul (ed.), *South Asia' s Weak States: Understanding the Regional Insecurity Predicament,* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 241-264.

Riaz, A. (2014). 'A crisis of democracy in Bangladesh,' *Current History,* 113 (762): 150-156.

Riaz, A. (2019). *Voting in Hybrid Regime: Explaining the 2018 Bangladeshi Election*. New York/Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan

Sobhan, R. and M. Ahmad (1980). *Public Enterprises in an Intermediate Regime: A Study in the Political Economy of Bangladesh, Dhaka:* BIDS.

STATFOR (2016). 'Bangladesh's descent into authoritarianism.' https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/bangladeshs-descent-authoritarianism.

About the Author

Ali Riaz PHD is distinguished Professor, Department of Politics and Government, Illinois State University, USA. He can be reached at: ariaz@ilstu.edu