

The good, the bad and the ugly: mechanisms to ensure accountability to people in Bangladesh

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In its life-span of 37 years, Bangladesh's experience with democracy, in two phases, is only 20 years old. This experience is a frustrating one and during the democratic era, the country has suffered from the diseases like unbridled corruption, partisan control of the public institutions, ineffective parliament, culture of confrontational politics and others. In 2006, the culture of confrontational politics reached its peak and power transition through peaceful election became quite impossible. Right at that moment, Emergency Power Rules was declared and a military-backed interim government came into power promising to create a level-playing field to organize a free and fair election. Since then, the government had taken a number of initiatives like reconstituting the public institutions, separating the judiciary from the executive branch, taking stern action against the corrupt persons, initiating reform of the political parties etc., which according to a baseline survey conducted by Institute of Governance Studies (Conducted during September-November, 2007) have been widely appreciated by the general mass. However, at the same time, the survey result indicates that despite the grim experiences of almost two decades of democratic era, people indeed want to be ruled under an elected democratic government and they actually want the election by 2008. Based on this, the paper attempts to analyze, why people actually want to go back to the democratic rule which may fail to ensure the continuation of the current effectiveness of the public institutions. Defining the 'accountability to people' mechanisms practiced at various regimes as good, bad and ugly, the paper argues that though the democratic governments failed to establish a 'good' accountability mechanism (i.e. a functioning and effective parliament, a decentralized local government system etc.), it did indeed succeed in establishing a 'bad' one (i.e. a corrupt yet efficient informal means like close interaction with political leaders at local level which channeled the demand of the people to the national level leaders). This 'bad' accountability mechanism is in fact better than the 'ugly' one which exists during an unelected government where people has no direct interaction with the power zone and the government tends to take an elitist outlook. The paper further argues that as the political leaders form the only group that maintains a close relationship with the rural mass, despite having doubt on them, people incline to rely on them to have their demands realized.

Key words: Democracy, Accountability, Public institutions, Political leaders, People

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