Difficulties in defining public needs and aspirations

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Where should the focus of development be, to meet public needs and aspirations in the current political atmosphere? There are multiple dimensions of development, and efforts to put those within one frame may be futile.

Since most envisage politics to be at the center stage, I express my views on it in the first of the two-part series. It does not address the short-term party-centric saga - but highlights the undercurrents that are likely to shape the politics of the land in the long term. Proposals and views on the economic and social agenda, which need focus in the short and medium terms are discussed in the second part. Prior to engaging on the substantive issues, it is deemed worthwhile to share few words on the title of the paper.

There are times when views on "public needs and aspirations" are fragmented. In general, people with non-compatible interests fail to define a common 'public need'. For quite some time, that has unfortunately been the case in Bangladesh and the extent of non-compatibility has been on rise. Part of the reason lies in diffused identity of 'public' with unregulated (or biased) integration of our society with global economy and society. It is widely acknowledged that 'public interest' perceived by national government often differs from those identified by international interest groups. There is also the dilemma in multiple identity – many of us have interests tied to other countries either directly or through

children, many more have acquired alien cultural traits due to temporary residency in foreign land. More importantly, technocratic perspectives on policies at the country levels run into difficulties due to the dynamics of political economy around country-level governance tied to global governance.

Let me ignore the 'needs' – because we are too accustomed to the idea of one-way resource transfer to meet 'needs' and our leaders are happy to oblige, so long those are not met out of their pockets. I shall confine to my aspirations as a residing citizen in Bangladesh – a sovereign land where I would like to see unhindered human creativity and inclusive development flourish.

Of the various dimensions of development, centrality of politics (with its wider meaning beyond partisan views) in current affairs of Bangladesh is widely recognized. There are many views, rarely debated in the open, on the future of Bangladesh's politics in the face of increased interests of regional and global powers on happenings in and around Bangladesh. Political institutions are either the first or the very last to succumb to external powers (during the latter's expansionary phase), and no political authority may remain sovereign without the supports of other nationally rooted institutions.

If I may speculate, Bangladesh has possibly reached a stage where most institutions have lost credibility, and the apparent 'strong' political power only testifies that. Unless the political leadership rebuilds those institutions, it runs the risk of either losing political power, or losing sovereignty. In line with the aspiration articulated earlier, I propose that nurturing centralised democracy in the political sphere is the most ideal route to take for rebuilding institutions in other spheres. The rest of this note will further elaborate the context in which my central proposition may find rationale.

Across globe, usage of the term 'democracy' has turned farcical, humiliatingly reminding one of the Emperor's New Clothes. Ironically, in the current setting of global power, 'naked' emperor in a technologically advanced society produces its counterpart 'naked' emperor or empress in a land that is under domination. History in other parts of the world, particularly that of the Middle East in recent past, suggests of a pattern: autocracies, once nurtured by agencies of global capital (or should I say, 'strategists'), felt empowered to rise against their mentors.

Unfortunately, the local autocracy lost contacts with their constituency, and soon became vulnerable to manipulation by external forces. We have seen many such regimes succumb to the pressure from outside, aggravated by grievances from inside that were allegedly fueled by external forces.

It is a difficult choice for political leaders in countries like ours, and many

therefore seek a third path – integrating oneself with the regional or global governance structure. Lest we forget, the Subedars of Bangla were appointees of Delhi-based emperors. But revolting against the 'masnad' for greater share in rent was normal, and the relation between the center and the periphery had gone through ups and downs. All conflicting parties on political evolution in Bangladesh however agree that the course this part of the sub-continent took since the Partition of 1947 (or since the division of Bengal) had taken us on a different trajectory. I leave it to the visionaries to debate and agree on the feasibility of a return to the past track (prior to dividing Bengal!) or emerge as a separate entity (from a long menu of options) that can come to terms with all its adversaries.There are however two important aspects of recent developments in governance that are briefly raised before concluding this narrative/response.

In more recent past, there has emerged a new element in the post-neocolonial "masnadi" culture of political governance across globe. It is the rise of a new group of people who, voluntarily or involuntarily, declared loyalty to an advanced country without losing touch with their roots. It also includes people, small in relative size but globally vocal, who worked for supra-national agencies and look for meaningful engagement after retirement. Combinedly, the group has increased in size and proves to be worthy partner of the strategists located in advanced countries and operate globally. Due to their practical exposure to a wide range of global transactions and familiarity with technology, they also have the potent to contribute towards enhancement of their countries of origin. Inclusion of this group in the analysis and their 'interests' in the root possibly allows one to better comprehend the new forms (and instruments) of control that the traditional western power may potentially exert upon the developing countries. Bangladesh is no exception – rather, it appears to be a major test case of new form of governance.

A linear perspective on fast technological advancement and their control by few countries makes one skeptic about the future of sovereignty in countries like Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh's governance faces a secondchallenge in balancing 'influences' oftwo regional powers in cultural, economic and strategic fronts. Ironically, those also provide basis for a reactive sense of identity that is binary due to the very cause. Interestingly however, neither the submission to one of the powers nor the reactive identity will get endorsement from the new class (in support of 'global governance') I referred to earlier. The latter, still an insignificant entity in their newfound home, appears to be keen on extraction, further complicating the process of convergence of ideas to shape an identity within Bangladesh. It matches well with the character of political process inside the country, where participations in mass meetings are bought at cheap prices

and where the 'herd' factor outweighs meritocracy and sustains lumpen politicians keen on perpetuating divisiveness in the society. It also fits in well with the current economic programs that significantly include projects of interest beyond national territory and therefore facilitate rent extraction by the FCBOs in collaboration with local 'herd-leaders'.

I do not envy the political leader, who faces a difficult taskofinitiating a process of uniting competent forces and give the country a sense of direction. It will have to be a long-drawn process where segments of foreign citizens of Bangladeshi origin (FCBOs, not NRBs), with multi-cultural identity and having social and economic networks extended across globe, may contribute as well. But right policies and regulations to screen the selection should be in place. And, that requires informed judgment of the trends among (out-) migrants during different epochs in the history of people in this land. Strategic behavior in a world of 'strategists' demand that a core group of locals and full-time returnees, drawn from all spheres of life,bedevelopedto act asthe 'driving force' within the local body politics.Such a group can coordinate all resources for taking forward the cause of the land – my aspiration. And, it is important to practice democracy based on reasons within that group, who may subsequently spread democratic practices and values through group formation in other segments of the society they represent. Preparing the nation for all future eventualities remain the responsibility of today's leaders – clearly, neither through autocracy, divisiveness and abusive words, nor by pretending to be at the helm of a 'democratically' elected government! The visionaries, old and young, need to define the space for unity in political space.

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