

## **Bangladesh at 50: Political Development: Making, Unmaking and Rebuilding of Founding Principles**

### **Transcript Begins:**

**Chelsea Ferrell:** Thank you for joining us today. I'd like to welcome you all to the 'Bangladesh at 50' Conference, 'Looking Back, Looking Forward'. My name is Chelsea Ferrell, and I am the Assistant Director of the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute at Harvard University.

The institute engages in interdisciplinary research to advance and deepen the understanding of critical issues in South Asia and its relationship with the world. The Mittal Institute acts as a platform for South Asia-related activities and research across the various schools and departments at Harvard. As part of this mission, we run many different programs, including student and faculty grants, a semester seminar series, programs for visiting scholars and fellows and workshops and conferences, such as this one. The Mittal Institute has a long tradition of working in Bangladesh and has sponsored several scholars and artists from the region to come to Harvard. We have held a number of events over the years on topics related to Bangladeshi current and historical issues and have participated in events and hosted conferences in Bangladesh.

We are so grateful to many of our Bangladeshi supporters, among them Rajeeb and Nadia Samdani, the Kadar family, Professor Ruhul Abid, Associate Professor of Brown University Medical School, and Professor Kaushik Basu, Professor of International Studies at Cornell University. We would also like to thank Brac, and Brac University for their collaboration with the institute on a number of events, both at Harvard and in Dhaka.

During the breaks between panels today, we will share works of two Bangladeshi artists, who were selected as fellow through the Mittal Institute's Visiting Artists Fellows Program. Through a competitive process, the program offers fellowships to poor, mid-career artists from across South Asia, and invites them to Harvard's campus for two months. Artists use this time to engage with Harvard faculty and students in the classroom and then showcase their work through a public talk and exhibition. The program allows the Harvard community to engage with artists of diverse backgrounds whose work in various mediums addresses socio, economic and political issues in South Asia.

On behalf of the institute, I would like to thank all of those who have made this conference possible, especially the two professors who have co-organized this conference, Professor Marty Chan, Lecturer of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and Professor Richard Cash, Senior Lecturer on Global Health at the Harvard T Chan School of Public Health.

Without further ado, I'd like to turn it over to Tarun Khanna, Jorge Paulo Lemann Professor at the Harvard Business School, and Faculty Director at the Mittal Institute. Thank you.

**Tarun Khanna:** Great. Thank you, Chelsea. Good morning and good evening, and good afternoon depending on where you are in this Zoom world. Welcome to this Bangladesh conference, we are extremely pleased to have you. As Chelsea mentioned, at the Mittal Institute, we focus very much on doing work that's relevant to all the countries of South Asia and are of course very interested in competitive work across the different countries, and really pleased to have this opportunity led by my colleagues Marty and Richard to deepen our engagement with Bangladesh. Let me add my thanks to all the scholars from Bangladesh, as well as from the US and elsewhere who are participating in this. We are very grateful for your support in building this.

As befits the Mittal Institute, which you will see in all these panels is incredible diversity of topical area. The one area that's underrepresented that I would like to see is more on science, but of course that's a problem with most developing countries. We don't have enough scientific

advancement going on and it's the focus of this institute is to try and nudge this along but you'll see ample representation of civil society, social sciences, politics, history, the arts, things that Bangladesh is rightly celebrated for, and I'm really looking forward to learn from my colleagues.

I'm going to hand it over to people who actually know much more, infinitely more about Bangladesh than I do, not least Marty and Richard. So, let me formally introduce my colleague Martha Chan, Marty Chan, which is how we know her, is a lecturer in public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, Co-founder and Senior Advisor of Weigo, which is a global network of women in informal employment, globalizing and organizing. Marty, I didn't know the full name of Weigo, I just know you as doing 'Weigo!' I knew it had to do with informal work, it's here we learn something from this event, but Marty has been a regular cheerleader for us to continue to engage with Bangladesh, and of course with India, both countries in which she spent some time. So, thank you Marty, and thank you Richard for organizing this and I'll hand off to you.

Martha Chan: Thanks Tarun, and thank to the Mittal South Asia Institute for hosting this conference, and welcome. I want to join Chelsea and Tarun in welcoming all of you to this event. Richard Cash of the Harvard Chan School of Public Health were honored to be as to help organize this conference, given our long association with Bangladesh, dating back at least 50 years to the East Pakistan era, just before the War of Liberation and we are so pleased that over 500 persons have registered for the conference. And we are very excited by the lineup of speakers and moderators.

The conference will feature five panels on different aspects of Bangladesh's development over the past 50 years and conclude with a panel on the future of Bangladesh. There will be three panels on each of the two half days of the conference. Today features the panels on political development, economic development, and human development in Bangladesh, and tomorrow features the panels on women's empowerment, the role of civil society, and the future of Bangladesh. We sincerely hope you will join us on both the days, but if you miss one or more panels, the conference is being recorded and we will share a link of the recordings with all registered participants.

It is now my distinct pleasure to introduce the first panel on political development in Bangladesh. The moderator is Gary Bass, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University. He is well-known in Bangladesh for his book 'The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide,' which one several prestigious awards. The speakers in this panel, whom Gary will introduce, but who probably don't need an introduction are Rounaq Jahan and Rehman Sobhan. So, Gary, over to you to begin the conference. Thank you so much.

Gary: Good morning everyone. I'm honored to be here, I greatly appreciate this, and I wanted to send my sincere thanks to the Mittal Institute, to Tarun Khanna, as well as to Marty Chan who has done such a wonderful job of bringing us together. Chelsea Ferrell, Meghan Sewack, everyone has done a wonderful job and I'm deeply honored to be here. It's my privilege to introduce Professor Rounaq Jahan and Professor Rehman Sobhan.

Professor Rounaq Jahan is currently a distinguished fellow at the Center for Policy Dialogue in Bangladesh and has previously served as Professor of Political Science at Dhaka University, and a senior research scholar and adjunct professor at Columbia University. She headed the women's program at the International Labor Organization in the ILO and the UNAPDC in Kuala Lumpur. Her many publications include 'Pakistan: Failure in National Integration,' published by Columbia University Press, 'Bangladesh Politics: Problems and Issues,' published by the University Press, 'The Elusive Agenda: Mainstreaming Women in Development,' published by Zed Bangladesh, 'Promising Performance,' again published by Zed books, and 'Political Parties in Bangladesh: Challenges of Democratization,' published by Prothoma. She received her PhD in political science from Harvard University. This is a homecoming for her.

Professor Rehman Sobhan is Chairman of Center for Policy Dialogue in Bangladesh. He served as a Professor for economics in Dhaka University, as a member of the Bangladesh Planning Commission, as Director General of the Bangladesh Institute Development Studies, as the Founder and Executive Chairman of CPD, and the Executive Director of the South Asia Center for Policy Studies. In 1981, he served as a member of the first caretaker government, headed by President Ahmed. He was actively associated with the Bangladesh Nationalist Movement in the 1960s, and was a participant in the liberation struggle in 1971, he was awarded the nation's highest civilian award for that. He is published extensively on the subjects about the political economy of development, foreign aid, petrol politics, agrarian reform, regional cooperation in South Asia, democracy, and governance.

Among his most recent publications, there are 'Challenging the Injustice of Poverty,' published by Sage, 'Untranquil Recollections: The Years of Fulfilment,' also published by Sage, and the second volume of this memoir is 'Untranquil Recollections: Nation Building in Post-Liberation Bangladesh,' will also be published by Sage.

My two distinguished panelists, who by the way, are appearing in the same window. We have Professor Jahan on the left and Professor Sobhan on the right. These two distinguished panelists have proposed some guiding questions to start their remarks. They are going to speak, then I'll ask a few questions to them and then we will open it up to questions and answers from the audience. Again, conducted as always these days through Zoom, and I'll be moderating through that.

So, I wanted to start with a question to Professor Jahan about how her quarter century of national struggle against Pakistan. How this shaped the founding principle of the Bangladesh state, and why and how these principles succeed in gaining popular support so quickly, and that's a question to Professor Jahan, please.

**Rounaq Jahan:** Thank you very much, Gary, for your kind introduction, and thanks to the Mittal Institute for organizing this webinar. For me, who grew up in the 1960s when our nationalist struggle was also gaining momentum, who witnessed the historic events of March 1971, and who lived through our National Liberation War, it is a great moment of joy to be able to celebrate the golden jubilee of our independence.

At the time of our independence, there were many doubts expressed particularly by people outside of Bangladesh about whether Bangladesh will survive as a state, that there were fears that there would be bloodbath and chaos. But surprisingly, within a few months, we became politically stable, and we started our journey as a parliamentary democracy, and within a year, we formulated our Constitution, which adopted four fundamental principles of state, which I would like to call our founding principles. These four principles were nationalism, secularism, democracy, and socialism. So, what I would like to is first talk a little bit about how in 1972, in our Constitution and also we ourselves, conceptualized and viewed these four founding principles. And then I will turn to the second question that how did these four founding principles become acceptable, how a consensus was developed so quickly around these four founding principles in the 24 years of our nationalist struggle.

So, let me first start with our first principle, which is nationalism. In 1960-72, in our Constitution, nationalism was defined as the Bengali nationalism. The basis of our nationalism was our language, Bengali. But I was reading through the debates in our constituent assembly and also an interesting speech that was made by the father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in November 1972, when the Constitution was formally adopted. He said, yes, our nationalism is based on our language but there are many nations where we have multi-language nations. So, it is not just the language, but it is our common struggle for nationhood that has made Bengal our claim to a nation state accepted, recognized and supported by people.

So, he described it as a feeling. A nation is, if a group feels that they are a nation and they are willing to struggle for it. So, I found that interesting because we thought that generally the emphasis was just simply on language and not our long struggle for our nationhood. The second founding principle was secularism, and again, secularism, the way we conceptualize state, there are five aspects to it. One is equal rights of all religious groups, second that equal freedom to practice all religions, third was that there should not be any political organization based on religion. Religion-based parties are prohibited in Bangladesh when we became independent. So, our understanding was no communal violence, but what I found interesting in some of the speeches of the founding father was that he repeatedly talked about the responsibility of the majority community towards the minority community, that it is not simply enough that there would be equal rights and equal freedom, but the majority community has a responsibility to ensure that there is no violence or injustice done to the people of the minority community. I think this is something that we often forget. The third founding principle was democracy, and here our understanding, and our Constitution defines it more or less as all the elements of a liberal democracy, which meant civil, political, and fundamental rights, free elections, independence of the judiciary, freedom of media, parliamentary supremacy and so on. Again, what I found interesting in that speech of Sheikh Mujibur on November 4th is that when he was introducing the four principles, he acknowledged that in many liberal democracies, democracy searched to take the interest of the elite and the powerful. So, he said that what we would like to do is to make sure that the elites don't capture democracy, that our democracy serves the interest of the marginalized and the excluded, and on that basis, he then defended our fourth principle, which is socialism. And two aspects of socialism were emphasized. One is elimination of exploitation, and the second is the establishment of a more egalitarian society.

Let me then turn to the second question that how we built a consensus around these four founding principles in the 24 years of our nationalist struggle against Pakistan. Here, five issues which drove the Bengalis against the Pakistanis during the 24 years of Pakistan, we started with the issue of language and culture. As we know, within a few months of establishment of Pakistan in February 1948, when Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who was the founder of Pakistan came to Bangladesh, at that time East Pakistan, and declared that only Urdu will be the state language of Pakistan, then the students protested. And then, from then on the Bengali Language Movement started. In 1952, students shed blood in that movement and it gained momentum every year, and finally in 1956, Pakistani rulers accepted that Bengali will also be recognized as one of the two state languages of Pakistan. But even though Bengali was recognized as a state language, there were constant attacks on the Bengali and culture. Pakistani rulers always alleged that Bengali was too much under Hindu influence and Rabindranath Tagore's songs were banned in mid 60s in what was then East Pakistan. So, cultural activists from the beginning, all through 50s and 60s, they played a very important role in putting forward and resisting this assault on our language and culture, and projecting the Bengali language and culture, and popularizing it.

The second issue that drove us against Pakistan was the issue of place of religion in politics. From the beginning, Bengalis was communal harmony because there were almost 20 percent Hindus left in what was then East Pakistan. So, Bengali political leaders of the opposition party, they always believed in co-existence of Hindus and Muslims as equal citizens, and when Pakistan declared itself as an Islamic republic then Sheikh Mujibur, who was then a member of the national assembly protested in the national assembly in Pakistan, and Bengalis were also in favor of a hint electorate, that Hindus and Muslims will be part of the same electorate. In 1964, when there were communal riots, Bengali opposition political leaders, they actively worked to stop that riot. This issue of religion was very closely linked to the issue of language because all Bengali speakers, Hindus and Muslims, they were all supposed to be part of the Bengali identity was prioritized over language.

The third issue was autonomy. Again, from the beginning, the Bengali opposition political leaders, we emphasized regional autonomy for what was then East Pakistan. In 1950, there was a grand national convention, where only two subjects, foreign policy and defense was supposed to be in

the hands of the central government. So, this autonomy issue was another running issue, which then we see in 1960s culminated in the famous six-points movement, which was the movement started by Sheikh Mujibur, which galvanized the whole nation. And the six points, again, only two subjects were left in the hands of the central government. And then we had the issue of democracy, mostly Pakistan was ruled by civil military bureaucratic elites and Bengalis had no place in that, and repeatedly, there were denials of elections. In 1954, when the opposition formally won the election in the provincial assembly, then within 90 days, there was a central rule imposed. The first election was in 1970, and the economy was the last issue where we always thought that resources were taken away from what was then East Pakistan to the central government.

Let me then conclude on one final observation, and that is that all these issues were driving us against the central government, and there were there from 1957, but what was surprising that how in the final phase, a short period, 69 to 70, the whole nation was mobilized behind the nationalist struggle. And I will just mention here a personal story, when I went as a graduate student at Harvard in 65, the movement against Ayub Khan, the martial ruler, had just started, and when I came back for data collection in 68, everything on the surface was calm, all the political leaders were in jail. But within three years, when I was interviewing everybody was saying that it's just too much, we cannot stay together, and then of course within two years after that, in 1971 March, people spontaneously rose up in resistance.

So, I think the question here is yes, it is true that Sheikh Mujibur played a very critical in mobilizing the whole nation, but I think we need to also ask, why was it so acceptable to the general population that why did our peasants rose up spontaneously and took up arms when they never knew how to use arms to fight our nationalist struggle. I think this is a question that we need to explore further. Thank you very much. And now over to Rehman, and I know I spoke a bit longer. So, Rehman can now speak longer and I will then peak shorter in my intervention next time.

**Rehman Sobhan:** Are you going to begin by posing any question to me or do I begin where you left off?

**Ronaq Jahan:** Yes, I think you are supposed to speak now.

**Rehman Sobhan:** Alright. Well, according to our division of labor, Ronaq gets to say all the positive things and it comes over to me to see how the tradition of the founding principles was really carried over and practiced in the process of both nation building and nation un-building to the extent that that element came into play. As with of all narratives of post-colonial societies, what you essentially dream about in many ways works really well. I think we had a very good dream on the economic front, but in other areas the dreams were somewhat more, went through a darker phase.

Now, I think as far as Bangladesh is concerned, I will really focus my remarks on two elements of the founding principles: democracy and socialism, in fact really take its trajectory to see what really were the driving forces that influenced this narrative. As far as democracy was concerned, right from the beginning, we faced a number of structural problems, which in fact had a defining impact on the working of the democratic process. I'll run through them, actually try quickly.

One of the more basic problems arose from the fact that over a period of almost 25 years, going back to the late 1950s, there was only one dominant democratic party in Bangladesh really, the Awami League, eventually led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, there were other parties and they had their moments of glory but in any process of democratic mobilization and contestation the Awami League remained unchallenged in terms of its electability. And the one occasion, they were given an opportunity to express themselves in the 1970 election, they won an overwhelming majority winning 161 seats out of a 163 available for contestation for the national parliament. This process carried over in Post Liberation in Bangladesh, but you had one leader

who was treated above the fray of founding father of the nation, you had a political party which was overwhelmingly dominant and within this contextual framework, you needed to bring, construct, a democratic process. Now, we were not only politically mobilized country, but we had also been invested with all the qualities of sainthood when you in fact operate with framework of such objective circumstances. The chances of this emerging as a robust, strong democratic culture is not great, because essential to that is that you have contestation and you have in fact political processes, which are there to challenge you. What resistance there was tended to manifest itself mostly at the underground level, where people thought, particularly those from the left, who had rather performed feebly during the course of the liberation was itself, thought that they now had an unfinished liberation struggle to convert Bangladesh into some sort of a Maoist republic, and lots of arms were available to them to indulge their fantasies in this particular area.

Over and above that, of course you also had the sense of empowerment of the military elements who had actually fought the war and who felt that they had as much of a right to nation building as the elected representatives. Therefore, they had a sense of unfulfilled or a sense of disempowerment, which they felt had to be recognized. So, these were the difficult circumstances in which the nation had to be built, and the byproduct of this was a concentration of power in the hands of Bangabandhu himself as the epitome of the nation building process. His assassination within three and a half years of the establishment of the founding of the nation state led to a complete transformation in the political culture and virtual undoing of the founding principles around which the nation was constructed.

The objective conditions which flowed from that period were twofold, one you had certain notions in the tradition of the old powerful, executive president and when the presidential system returned to parliamentary system .. powerful executive Prime Minister and this power was in fact actually enhanced in the expense of the weakening of the elective bodies of the legislatures now part of the weakening of the legislature originated from the fact that the electoral process itself was captured by the executive and the early elections during the period where two generals in fact served as Presidents and the cantonment was the dominant political force in the country ensured the culture of the managed election would in fact actually ensure not only the ruling party that you want but even those who would constitute the opposition tended to get kind of predetermined where the more acceptable elements of the opposition found themselves happily elected and those who were less desirable variably ended up defeated in the elections.

In this the culture really emerged and in this particular period of time you had the undoing of a long period of democratic mobilization which culminated in the emergence of an independent Bangladesh, when in fact the political forces firstly led by the daughter of Gogobandhu who took over the leadership of the party in the beginning of the eight days and then strangely enough by the widow of the first general who in fact actually moved to undo the democratic process and expose us in the era of cantonment rule emerged actually as the leader of a party constructed at the cantonment but in the period of the 1980s then reached fulfillment as a civilian democratic party based on street mobilization and when they came together with — to overthrow the second military dictator Irshad we thought we had entered into a new democratic. Such was in fact the ... on the streets the second liberation of Bangladesh as we recalled it at the end of 1990 and the expectation essentially was you would have a rebuilding of democracy which should be in .... at the cantonment more to the point you know had two strong civilian democratic parties in fact the BNP led by Khalid.. actually much to everyone's surprise won the election in early 1991 and you had in fact a system of elections through a non party and caretaker system. It was in fact a member of that caretaker government at the beginning of 1991 which carried out perhaps the first free and fair elections held in post liberation Bangladesh in accepted sense term and this essentially held out great promise but unfortunately everything which looks promising in Bangladesh begins well but doesn't always end in the same way and so we began a process of undoing our greatest assets.

One was converting unique and well functioning two party system into a highly confrontational

almost tribalised society of ..... and..... who in fact entered into such fierce contestation that it made the parliamentary system itself dysfunctional.

Secondly, of course what was again meant to be a role model just not for Bangladesh but in fact for other developing countries getting there exposure to democracy system of free and fair elections under non party caretaker system, we began picking at the edges of the system and we went through a process of trying to un make this now in spite of all these efforts of un making we managed to hold 4 free and fair elections in 1991, in 1996, in 2001 and of course again with the brief appreciative un making which lead to the military turning up again, another free and fair election in 2009 those were actually the last free and fair elections we held and this again had the negative effect because the next party which came in the ivy league led to the process of deciding that systems of non- party's end free and fair elections held under caretaker system, carried too many risks, one of the risks was that the incumbent party may not actually come back into power they then re amended the constitution and went back to holding elections under incumbent government and of course we went through two in a way you can call them sort of non elections which were essentially uncontested the major opposition parties were given little opportunity to participate there were electoral boycotts, there were violence and eventually much manipulation of the electoral process so this was the unfortunate narrative of democracy, both 50 years spent in trying to get acceptable electoral system which we have not succeeded.

Dysfunctional parliament which even when it was functioning in fact was too confrontational to it's role and of course now it is really dysfunctional without any capacity for holding anyone accountable and you have all powerful executive now I will briefly talk about the problems of socialism, so socialism got really as a concept of a more equitable as the founding father thought of it when exploitation free society in which the privileged elite would not be permitted to capture power, virtually in fact had it's ..... When the day he was actually assassinated and the political and the economic agenda which was effectively put in place gradually led to a process of unchallenged attempts to in fact have a state sponsored system of capitalism which in it's final phase is evolved into what we may call a very advanced process of .... Capitalism, now this was not without it's benefits because in the process the state building of a sponsored capitalist class massive resources go through the banking system as well as through fiscal concessions and subsidies contributed to converting a non existent entrepreneurial culture into highly dynamic entrepreneurial system so there were positive results which in fact will be talked about in the next session when we have demonstrated extraordinary capacities of growth and there's a spilt over into even poverty reduction and other positive gains but the consequential outcomes of this process of sponsored capitalism and of the state constantly tilting the balance of channeling resources into the hands of politically patronized elite was increasingly again in ..... system highly exploitative and unjust society in which most of the privileges of economic development and opportunities for development tended to be progressively concentrated so today we now have a system in which you have done well economically, you've had good growth rates, you've had poverty reduction but you have had this emergence of highly elitist first world society emerging and a large you may say decent franchised majority who have done well in an absolute sense but in face of extreme relative deprivation and the worst aspect of this is that it led to the political capture of the system by an elite where the consequence now completely dominate the parliament virtually the entire parliament formally declares itself as businessmen and those who do not in fact aspirant businessmen who've given enough time in parliament will also emerge as businessmen and who in fact have used their power to in fact lead to a highly unregulated system which has lead to massive debt defaults brining our banking systems close to a state of collapse at least the governmental institutions are now in a state of great endangerment and you have a system now in which commercial banks are using the deposits of hundreds and millions of peoples to in fact channel loans to a privileged elite who in many cases do not pay back these loans so this has become a process of inequitable capital accumulation sponsored by an unregulated system of governance so the political story and the philosophical outcome of this have been somewhat removed from the aspirations of the founding father because there are positive elements to the story which you will hear about in later sessions but these are the

elements which I'll leave you with, let Rounaq carry on the story as to what we might do to turn this around.

**Gary Bass:** Wonderful, thank you very much so I am gonna keep this going by asking about what new visions, what actors, what institutions might be required to generate more inclusive and more just, more democratic and more sustainable political order in Bangladesh.

**Rounaq Jahan:** Thank you Garry. My apologies previously you are supposed to ask the question and I asked Rehman to carry on when we don't see your face, it is very difficult to focus.. anyway to get back to your question. I will mostly focus on the part of rebuilding democracy and I think they want to talk about rebuilding the principle of socialism or how do we build the economy as you all know that rebuilding democracy is just not a challenge for Bangladesh, where of course we had so many breakdowns and that has not been an continuity but even in established democracies such as our neighboring India or even a very old democracy such as the United States we have now seen the major challenges of rebuilding democracy so for Bangladesh my ... the way I look at it is that we should start with things that are easier, more doable things where we already have some building blocks for instance so the first task I would say is to give media and civil society complete freedom because if during the period of democracy from 1991 onwards if one indicator was doing very well in Bangladesh and all is showing an upward projector was the voice indicator and that was because of the role that media was playing we.... For the first time media started doing investigative journalism and .... All types of corruption that is .... So they were really trying to do their job, similarly for the first time we had human rights and other kinds of civil society organizations, again making demands on the political system so that day... these are I find.... Here we have some fraction, people are willing to take these institutions, democratic institutions ... so all of that needs to be done is if the government has lots of different kinds of acts to fit... this media and I am sure you have recently heard about the digital security act I think and journalist could be kept in prison and lot of .. they cannot be given even bails, so I think that some of this laws are withdrawn then I think even media and civil society can play its role, the second one are Rehman talked a lot about elections, free elections it is not.. we don't need any technical knowledge or support to organize free and fair elections because we indeed be able to organize full free and fair elections but before we could organize free and fair elections I think we have to step back, our political actors have to step back from the... takes all political culture and how that can be done, I think it is not for... how that political will can be created. I think that only political leaders, political activists they would have to figure out but unless we can determine, I have written about it many times that unless we can ensure the fate of the losers that somebody who wins.. losses the election that he will or she will not face harassments from the party and the workers other loses even loss of life so I think that the losers will leave well for another five years or four years to face another day and win elections so I think that kind of understanding has to be brought about, so I think that is a serious challenge again it is not simply in Bangladesh again Rehman talked about our two parties becoming so confrontational but I think I lived in the United States for many years and I have seen increasingly how even in the United States the parties are almost getting tribalized and their supporters so I think this is an global problem and I think this whole electoral game how we can do another ... create another kind of atmosphere I think is another major challenge.

Third, I think again the art of challenge is again to establish rule of law. Again, it is fairly easy to say where need to bring back independence of judiciary and let law be implemented in non parties and way but I think before we can do that we have to see why is it that we are not able to improve on our rule of law situation what is going on must be serving the interest of what a powerful books and even people who are not powerful they must be getting something out of this access patronized based system so unless we understand how the informal system works we and who it is benefiting and how we would not be able to change it so I think that to bring back the rule of law as we have on the books we have to first see why it got eroded in the first place unless it is serving a lot of people the interest of loss of rule of law, it cannot be sustained for so long so I think to rebuild that, we have to understand the current system and who it is serving how



and who we can provide the same kinds of efficiency and effective service within the rule of law and it... really justice in that way. Law is I find law is one thing and justice is another thing.

Then the fourth I think is that to rebuild democratic institutions in this world for the excluded we really talk, particularly in Bangladesh you will hear in the later panels that there has been tremendously rapid social development and economic growth so that Bangladesh society is not what it was describing before as it was in 1971 more or less in an undifferentiated peasant society, lot of ... what was then a ... has become a very rich class, there are middle classes, lower middle classes that are coming up with the different kinds of expectations so to build new democratic institutions we have to build stakes for these new people in the new institutions.

The old style politics probably or the old style institutions may not be good enough and so for that we need lot of free discussions, new platforms and unfortunately what has happened due 2006, 2007 or even before that from 90s onwards we had a lot of public discussions on political reforms, reforms of our electoral systems checks and balance systems political parties but unfortunately those kinds of discussions have stopped. And I think we need to start again those discussions and .. for that again we need the free atmosphere so that people can express their opinion so that we can rebuild and my final point on which I will close is on a point of optimism and that is that in Bangladesh we are very used to seeing system breakdowns and then lot of popular movements again renewals our story in some way is beginning then some breakdowns again renewals. But recently in 2018, there was a very interesting street movement done mostly by high school students, 12 or 14 year olds kids, few of their fellow students who had killed in a road accident then they.. spontaneously these kids were on the streets trying to not only protest but what impressed me is that all of our movements were before just protest but these kids were showing an alternative way that they were not just asking the state to do things. But they were trying to line up all the cars, they were checking the licenses and then they were, those people who didn't have licenses then they were giving them to police so to me if these 12 to 14 year olds not only could just say that no we don't want this but show us this can be done in this way and for three – four days in the middle of this... monsoon rain hundreds and thousands of this 12-14 year olds were on the streets showing another way of doing things in Bangladesh then I ... would not lose hope on Bangladesh and I keep my faith on the next generation to keep our future in very good hands, thank you very much.

**Gary Bass:** Rounaq that was wonderful, Rehman I wonder if you can share your thoughts on this.

**Rehman Sobhan:** Well, of course I am not going to come out as a 21<sup>st</sup> century, talking about how we are going to reconstruct socialism in Bangladesh in fact it's not a word which occurs very frequently in public discords these days but I think what is very important is to put down a few thoughts on what can be a more just society and how far this can be realized within the realm of the feasible so what we essentially have in mind is that quite positive gains have of course been emerged.

I mean we have got high growth capitalism with reduced poverty improvement in human development indicators and in fact an expanded safety net but we of course have a much more egalitarian and much more unregulated society within which this growth is actually taking place and particularly since this is the centenario of Gongobandhu and we are also commemorating our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary we have to at least go through the motions of paying .. service to the notions of what can be done to create a more just and egalitarian society so what are my thoughts on this.

I think the most important thing is that the state must itself take on the responsibility of not tilting the balance in favor of the elite, obviously a lot of inequalities have emerged through the dynamic of the market process I don't want to go into the detail debates on how the markets function and certainly the role of the states is very important and if you in fact have a state which over a period of 40 years has in fact actually been permitting huge resources to be challenged in the hands of a privileged business elite and is making no real regulatory effort to recover this and is letting these

debts pile up so that a culture of default has in fact actually been institutionalized within the system, then it means that a huge resource transfer has taken place, first from public banks in fact some have bankrupted, some are near bankruptcy and then when you've left it to the private commercial banks then from the depositors of commercial banks who are there in their millions but whose resources are being accumulated by a business elite who do not repay those loans now that is neither just, nor is it very efficient and in fact it is the grave threat to move towards becoming a more advanced developing country in fact to move into the category of depoliticizing appointments into our institutions of both regulation and governance most of them have been highly politicized and for this particular reason they constrained from effectively discharging their responsibilities I think we have Faisal Rehman here who has actually worked in regulatory institution.

I hope he will have something to say on that even though he always like to be more positive, we then have the problem of again tilting the balance through budgetary dispensations, fiscal privileges, subsidies if you in fact do a little balance sheet of in fact how much resources have been implicitly and explicitly directed to the elite through forms of tax concession and subsidies and compare it to investments in social safety measure programs and to in fact lending programs to the SME sectors you will see a huge imbalance in the way in between resources have in fact actually been dispensed, and the next area you need to address is the democratization of both education and healthcare, the education system has now effectively become a bifurcated system of private education, a lot of it given actually in the English language and the public educational system which had some point of tradition has now been severely compromised and which has essentially been the refuge of the less resourced privilege and the resources going into the educational system, public educational system in fact a fraction of what is minimally acceptable by any society as appropriate allocation for the sector, the health care system which in fact was severely exposed during the Covid crisis pointed out the sorry stage of public health care and here again you need to make massive investments, not just of resources but of governance so that people for both Education and Health access, in fact operating a level playing field.

Thirdly and fourthly some of the most hardworking.. people have been our working people, farmers, the women who work in garment industry, the women who are borrowing from the micro finance system, now what you really need is much more of institutional building in which the workers get a much higher share in the value addition process which comes from their primary produce or in fact their labor so whether we are talking about giving workers ownership rights in the companies where they were, whether we are talking about giving farmers who have quadruple the production but who don't anywhere near .. comme near participating in the full value addition in the value chain, how they can be integrated in fact into the value chain the way that has been brought about by AMUL in India and by SEVA in India as good examples of what could actually be done, then finally Migrants, migrants of course are some of the heroes of the developmental success of Bangladesh who have given us 42 billion dollars in our foreign exchange reserves but who in fact go abroad under extremely adverse conditions pay large sums of money, run huge risks, now after 40 years this is not acceptable you need to in fact create a set of institutions where you can collectively mobilize migrants develop them into better trained, better equipped service exporting companies rather than individualized exploited individuals and then you need to invest in enhancing their skills in being able to negotiate their contracts and then in being able to convert some of their major remittances into major assets of a productive nature which buy into some of the more dynamic sectors of the economy, these are some of the fantasies I would like to have about what couldn't be done about building a more just society I would like to think that they are not in the realm of imagination and in the realm of the feasible, thank you.

**Gary Bass:** I love that, the dream of a better society between the realm of the feasible, thank you very much for that. I am going to, let me make just one comment and then I wanna move to some wonderful questions from the audience. I'd like to move to those, that some of this, in the context of a global recession in democracy Larry Diamond from Stanford a political scientist has warned the product about 14 years .....reverse wave against democratization and in some ways

Bangladesh is caught up in a global tide, it's regional tide too if you look at the undermining democratic institutions of the society next door in India.

But this trend and it's also one which includes just to be critical for Harvard conference with some Americans here, the United States obviously had a catastrophic experience under Donald Trump. And it's not like that suddenly goes away because Joe Biden is president and there is a long way to go but... powerful executive prime minister, prime minister who in some ways functions like the president is on that does really loom over the country with problems from arbitrary arrests, critics of the government, the digital security act which was mentioned as ... free expression and independent media there's also problems of a security state that is feeling clearly impervious the UN is quite concerned about allegations or torture judicial killings and disappearances and the security forces in the army seem to feel that they can get away with an awful lot. Right now the UN high commissioner for human rights as I am sure many people will know is asking for an investigation into a specific event the death and pre trial detention of a writer Mushtaq Ahmed but also into the digital security act itself so this is a part of the global pattern but it is also attracted unwelcomed attention from the outside world, we have a ton of excellent questions and I am going to throw out a couple of them just so we have a hard stop at 8:25 and I want to make sure that many of these get covered, one question from Salim Rehan who's a professor of Economics at the great Dhaka university who asks about chronic capitalism and elite state capture and wonders this is more directed to Rehman , what kind of political process he would suggest to counter chronic capitalism and elite state counter.

One question directed specifically for Rounaq is about how this winner take all culture developed in Bangladesh is this just because of politicians who sort of play too rough or do you think Bangladeshi society as a whole has also contributed to it, let's start with those .. if we can try and go through those relatively quickly because there are lot's of great questions still waiting, many thanks may be we can start, Rehman do you wanna go first and then Rounaq.

**Rehman Sobhan:** Oh well Salim and I have participated in many discussions attempting unsatisfactorily to answer his question, I think the problem obviously is that the government itself has to decide whether their long term interests of moving the country towards form of more advanced development is best served by a system of chronic capitalism in which privileged people are given no market, non competitive access to resources is going to serve their need better, my suspicion is depending on the which particular interest they wish to promote if they have longer term interest about how they want the economy to look let alone how politics to look it would be there advantage to in fact at least rain in the chronic element of the capitalist system ... to see in fact if you want to practice capitalism then at least you do it within some agreed rules of the game where the market ... competitive market system can effectively operate but of course if you want to rest the politics of it then you need to move into a situation in which you democratize access to electoral office.

And the big problem now is that participation in the electoral system has become a business investment and the bigger the investments you make more likely you are to get in and you are then seeing your political presence in the institution as a process of furthering you a longer term business interest now you have to break away from that system and get to a point where you democratize the electoral process through perhaps state funding of elections where money itself is not the major variable, where you in fact have a oversight over the financing and use of funds in the election process and where political parties are themselves then persuaded to give nominations both to a larger constituency of women as also to a larger constituency of working people. In fact ironically the most dynamic sector of the society the farmers, the small and medium entrepreneurs even some of your most competitive non defaulting businessmen , your migrants, very few of them have any electoral representation so there is a huge mismatch between the dynamic entrepreneurial class on the one hand and the... voice they have in parliament. So this disconnect has to be reconnected and the system of power must be equated

with those who include the dynamic of the economy, I think that would be my response, but how to bring this about I am looking for my magic wand.

**Gary Bass:** Rounaq, please?

**Rounaq Jahan :** Thank you. First, of all Gary let me say that many of us here in Bangladesh also share the same concerns that you raised in your comment about all the things that are happening here violations of the human rights and this is why the first point that I made earlier is that for media and civil society and human rights activists please they do not face all the obstacles then people would get to hear about what is going on. So, I think that it is in the realm of the possible to withdraw all of these laws for instance to answer the question about the winner takes all culture here, this has happened gradually over the years.

This is the fifth side of the comment of our economic success story for instance in the 1970s the governments really didn't have that much money to.. if you are in the budget you are small so if you are controlling the state or in the government you do not have that much patronage to give but the mood that we are growing now so if you control the state then you have so much more money to give to your supporters. So the pool of the patronage system that becomes much larger and that is how over the years this is taking place in initially from 1991 up to say 2006 ... before every time there was an election but we found is that incumbents were always losing direction so at least people which to me was an indication that people really don't like the system so much, system of rule by patronage and corruption so that the only thing they could do is vote the incumbents out so for at least that system, even though it didn't take the winner takes all situation then at least it could rotate and limit the situation my current set of worries now is not so much that winner takes it all but what happens to the loser because now nobody wants to be a loser even for four or five years. And I think that we really need to get back into the situation to protect the losers and then somehow we can go back to this rotation even if we can not fundamentally change and then I think over the years we can probably tackle the winner takes all situation thank you.

**Gary Bass:** Thank you that's wonderful. I am going to throw out three more questions. I am trying to pick ones that sort of hit at different issues because our .... told that we have only ten minutes left. So first who asks whether or not there are parallels between Bangladesh's experience and other countries in Asia or beyond and in particular about the sort of ..... impact with ..... whether that's equivalent to similar deals struck in Japan, in Korea during their period. I am thinking, there I am obviously thinking of the work of the ... as ... who we miss and who we mourn. Chris Cana asks about the success of some famous NGOs in Bangladesh including gamin bank, BRAC and others and wondering if any of you hopes for further strengthening such grass-roots NGOs and Arung.... asks what are the .... For the elite to participate in the remaking of this system, did it rebalance things in favour of the ... franchise, why would they want to play ball with that, what possible incentives would they have to do that, so let me. And those, that will probably bring us to day 25 so let's, yeah we will probably wrap with those, Thanks. Maybe Rounaq, do you want to go first?

**Rounaq Jahan:** No, let Rehman go first.

**Gary Bass:** Good.

**Rounaq Jahan:** The parallel of Bangladesh and then, now that right.

**Rehman Sobhan:** Oh yes, yes yes.

**Rounaq Jahan:** yes.

**Rehman Sobhan:** Well we went through that phase, not just I think Japan and Korea but once upon a time even Suharto's Indonesia and Thailand and others were also seen as part of that Faustian east, southeast Asian miracle story, I think the problem with all those is that the faustian

story actually ended up in Korea with at least three presidents in jail. And in fact I think the latest lady is also headed the same way and in other cases of course the system was overturned, so the system it helps the I mean limited, we are now talking about a country which is 50 years old. And so there is already no reason at all why you want to make a pact with these people, and the people with whom you are making a pact are really not the .... and the .... With whom you are making pacts, they are the less efficient components even of the capitalists or as it is practised over here. So essentially you are doing this at the expense of highly dynamic element not just within the entrepreneurial community itself but also within the other components of the Bangladesh miracle, the women, the workers, the farmers, all of that and in fact, it is in Bangladesh's interest from that point of view that you are going to get both, the element of justice and as well as an element of efficiency where the growth narrative as also the justice narrative in fact actually go hand in hand, this is a major liability, and in fact the political consequences are going to be much more on the lines of the fate of the rather than the more side of the smooth evolution of the .... Singapore narrative over here, and it is not even in the interest of the present ruling elite, and sadly on of the prime minister herself that a system of this nature should in fact prevail, you want a system which can be .... to successors and which is a working system and this is really not sustainable.

**Rounaq Jahan:** Okay, let me answer the question on the future of the NGO's, I think there is still a lot of scope for NGO activities, see the main success is such as BRAC, gamin and gamin is not actually an NGO but there are mostly service deliver NGOs and they worked also. There is a very good government and NGO partnership that went very well and the distinguishing feature is that they brought many of their services upto scale at a national level. So Bangladesh still needs even in the health sector I think there are a lot of underserved areas, underserved issues so if there is a government and NGO partnership and Identifying areas and also the NGO entrepreneur like we had with our pioneers like Abed, Zafarullah and others, then I think there is a lot of scope we already miss NGOs for instance during the Covid crisis that.. at the community level mobilize people, even raising awareness these are the things NGOs do best. So I can see lot of scope for NGO activity and just in one minute to answer the other question and maybe Rehman may want to talk about this elite what is in for elites to get into any rebuilding of democratic constitutions, elites in for that matter, every class everybody works like in self interest and if elites where then to see even to protect their own interest it is better to do some, to get on board with some reforms then I think they will do it, but it is a question of how much pressure can the excluded build and so that, they cannot on the elite the main danger is always cooperation for instance and manipulation and how they can protect and promote their own interests and agenda, I think that is always a critical challenge, Rehman you want to say anything?

**Rehman Sobhan:** Well, even with the elites I mean there are contradictions it is in that every part of elites is a set of defaulter, every part of elite is participating in deals they are large and highly competitive component of the elite who would provide a much better service and the government would be much better benefitted by the fact actually operating within a competitive system where these people have a chance, correspondingly at other levels these are all highly productive components of the Bangladesh story and is in the interest of the government to in fact elevate them to give them a much better chance. If you are in that small segment of the elite which is exclusively getting your benefits depending on the size of your default and also as in fact managing this by getting deals only on the basis of being able to actually get yourself an opportunity to inflate the cost of a project.. that is something you will resist. You are really not a majority even in your own community it is my only hope that in the end both the state interest and the class interest will in fact .. address the lesser... the less participative and the less competent elements who are getting the benefits today, thank you.

**Gary Bass:** Thank you very much. So, against all expectations, I am delighted to say that we actually end on time which is something I have never done for any panel that I have ever been on or ever moderated so this is a personal first for me. I wanted to say it just falls for me to say many many thanks to Rounaq and Rehaman for these wonderful presentations so much that we have learned so much wisdom and I think a wonderful blend of realism and still some hope mixed with

all of that wisdom and hard one experience so my sincere thanks to you both, that was really wonderful I love that. I want to apologize to those of you who had wonderful questions, my thanks to those of you who asked, my apologies to those who we didn't get to. I am sure that these themes will be revisited throughout the course of the conference and many thanks to the Mittal centre and many to Marty Chan who did such a wonderful job of bringing us all together and structuring this so that it worked well and to Tarun for his leadership for all of this, to Chelsea and Megan and everyone, many thanks. We are going to now have a break and we will reconvene with panel two promptly at 8:30. Many thanks to everyone.

**Rehman Sobhan:** Thank you from our side to all of you, well thought out and very promising event. We are looking to log in to the rest of it.

**Rounaq Jahan:** Thank you.