

Fellow's Presentation- MAKAIAS

Topic: “Rethinking the Concept of Democracy in Bangladesh”

Presenter: **Srimanti Sarkar**, Research Assistant, MAKAIAS

External Expert: **Dr. Shantanu Chakrabarti**

Date: **3.1.2013**

Time: **3.30 pm**

Venue: **Azad Bhavan, Salt Lake**

Rapporteur: **Anwasha Ghosh**, Researcher, MAKAIAS

Ms. Srimanti Sarkar's presentation attempted to look at the varied understanding of the concept and practice of democracy that has developed in Bangladesh against the background of wider political, economic and social forces. Drawing on the frequent instances of societal unrest that prevail in Bangladesh she tried to explore the functioning of a democratic system over the years. Ms. Sarkar observed that since the country's inception the polity has undergone changes ranging from authoritarianism to militarization and then the establishment of democratic governance. She traced the political journey up to democracy by looking at the developments from a historical perspective. Considering certain indicators of democracy she tried to unravel plausible characteristics specific to Bangladesh's polity. As a Researcher she recognised that the setting of indicators faces numerous challenges, especially in the third world context, which in a way can cause us to re-think the parameters for measuring democracy as a whole. She depended on Freedom House data to substantiate her points. The primary approach of her research has been to initiate a comparative study between the democracies of Bangladesh and Pakistan. Given the limited progress of her research, the aim of the presentation was to initiate relevant questions rather than draw specific conclusions. She subsequently raised questions such as: Can any specific feature of Bangladesh's democracy be identified? What tools can be used for measuring Third World democracy? Some of those questions were addressed in the discussion session that followed after her presentation.

Discussion Session

Expert's Comments:

Dr Shantanu Chakrabarti congratulated the presenter on her thorough and comprehensive paper, observing that whatever be the circumstances within Bangladesh, the fault does not necessarily lie with the common people. To substantiate his argument, he cited some research conducted by renowned journalist and political commentator Yogendra Yadav, where the results clearly showed that people have faith in Democracy but not in political formations. Dr Chakrabarti added that politics in Bangladesh have always been violent, giving examples of Mujibur Rehman's regime as well. He advised the presenter to focus on the flawed inheritance of the country i.e. the pre-colonial structural legacy that Bangladesh inherited from British India. He briefly narrated the diverse experiences of East and West Bengal during that period and mentioned the effect of the Pak elite domination and how that continues to haunt the people in the two-party system that eventually developed. He observed that in Bangladesh the winner takes everything, which explains why the opposition refuses to accept the political verdict. He mentioned the limitation of elite-level discourse in Bangladesh. He ended his observations by questioning the indicators of Democracy.

Observations of Dr. Sreeradha Dutta, Director, MAKAIAS:

Beginning her observation from the point the external expert had concluded, Dr Dutta pointed to a study conducted by Subhachandran, where the attempt has been to look at the indicators for measuring democracy. She stated that the indicators of Freedom House that were extensively cited in the paper were not beyond question and advised the researcher to be more careful about depending too heavily on them. Dr. Dutta advised the presenter to focus on a few generic things in future, and to mull over the things written in the paper. Reading more authors, especially ones from the country, is absolutely imperative in area studies. The perspective from within was lacking in her paper; she advised her to highlight more perspectives. She questioned the Western sense of "democracy" and made the interesting observation that all the regimes that have ruled the country have not shown any sense of "democracy" in the way they operate. She mentioned that it was under the military Government (and not Democratic Government) that the country experienced its most free and fair election till date. She advised the researcher to mention certain critical areas which she needs to take into account, like the role of the Election Commission and the Executive Body. She admitted that religion is a tricky issue in respect to Bangladesh and that the researcher

needs to be careful while handling it. She concluded her observations by focusing on the progress made in women's issues, cross cultural mooring (especially the Hindu-Muslim dynamics), mentioning that the country has a free press which is amongst the strongest in South Asia. Overall she advised the presenter to rethink her paper and not to build her arguments based on Freedom House Data alone.

After the observation of two experts on the subject the floor was opened for the Q & A session. Some of the issues raised are as follows:

- Questions were raised on the meaning of the term 'flagging democracy'.
- Discussion took place on the transition from an Authoritarian regime to a Democratic one in Bangladesh.
- Scepticism was expressed on the validity of data cited in the paper. Some observers pointed out that inferences based on Western indicators for Democracy can be misleading.
- The mishandling of the Chittagong Hill Tracts issue in Mujib's time was touched upon.
- Questions were also raised on the questions and scepticism related to Freedom House Data and whether there was any need for redefining scale at all.