

## Book Review

**Political Parties in Bangladesh: Challenges of Democratization. Rounaq Jahan, Dhaka: Prothoma Prakashan, 2015, 212pp. ISBN 9789849003939****Md. Mizanur Rahman** ✉*Faculty Member, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University, Bangladesh***Online Version Published:** 1 July 2016**© 2016 South Asian Youth Research Initiatives for Development. This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY).**

Although Bangladesh witnesses general election to take place almost in a regular interval for the last few years, the state of democracy is crisis-ridden and Rounaq Jahan, the eminent political scientist of Bangladesh deals with the background of this crisis in her book *Political Parties in Bangladesh: Challenges of Democratization*. She starts her investigation with the following remark, 'deficits in the functioning of the parliament, and indeed democracy in Bangladesh originate in the weakness and malfunctioning of political parties' (p. 10). In this regard, she particularly concentrates on analyzing the history, ideology, functions, strengths and set-backs of the major political parties in Bangladesh, which is a major contribution in this field. In this review core issues of different chapters will be delineated first, few critical points will be raised that would need future attention to gain further insights into the process.

In chapter one, Jahan outlines five key roles of political parties in a democracy that include articulating different socio-economic interests, recruiting political adherents, mobilizing people for a social cause, expediting government's accountability, and finally connecting citizens with the government. She seems to be circumspect regarding the growth of clientelism among political parties in developing countries, particularly in Bangladesh and attempts to show how clientelism is established and sustained through the vicious use of ethnicity, religion and other markers of social differences.

Chapter two provides the major historical accounts and drawbacks of dominant political parties in Bangladesh. It demonstrates how Awami League (AL) formed and popularized through the promulgation of Bengali nationalist cause, occupied the center place of politics in the 1960s with

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its six-point movement, while Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) took anti- Bengali nationalistic position and opposed first the creation of Pakistan and later the emergence of Bangladesh. JI was constitutionally banned after the independence of Bangladesh but was rehabilitated by the military rulers, Major Ziaur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the founder of Jatio Party (JP). Both BNP and JP were branded as *Sarkari parties* because of their formation and propagation through state- sponsored policies. However, Jahan argues that key strategies of these parties were to exploit factionalism of existing parties and allure retired civil-military bureaucrats and technocrats. The strategy was to split the faction-prone existing parties into various groups and to pick up the support of the break- away factions what Jahan calls as 'carrot and stick' policy (p. 26).

While discussing the primary trends of political parties in Bangladesh, Jahan shows how the dynastic rule of major political parties and hegemonic control of the top leaders in legislative, executive and judiciary aspects intrude the natural progression of the parties in one hand and make different state organs dysfunctional on the other. Moreover, ideology or policy development has lost their significance to political parties while capturing state power became the prime motive to them. The vast number of political workers, particularly two major parties AL and BNP are used not to propagate ideological strengths, but for election campaigns and street agitations. Moreover, the criminalization of politics is underway where local *mastans* have developed a vicious nexus with the political leaders. Jahan argues that successive regimes used law enforcement agencies in a partisan manner to protect their own *mastans*. She then narrates the political crisis of 2006-2007, failure of '*Minus 2* strategy', which, as argued, intended to democratize party politics by ousting two party leaders Sheikh Hasnia and Khaleda Zia from politics. She further discusses the changed status of the smaller political parties as they became from being marginalized actors to serviceable important players with bargaining power harnessing the advantage of the alliance politics ostensibly evident since the 1990s. She also ventured to discuss why no third party, beyond two major parties, has emerged dominantly. Turning example of *Nagorik Shakti*, a party supposed to be launched by professor Yunus in 2007, ultimately failed to accumulate mass endorsement, Jahan argues, 'it could be because of the negative assessment by voters about the prospects of these third parties ever winning enough seats to establish themselves as credible contestants for state power' (p. 67).

Chapter three assesses the ideology, organizational structure, membership, support base and factionalism of the major political parties. The author chalks out the ideological facets and organizational structure of all political parties. Organizational structures of the parties are somewhat similar to each other except the JI. In the case of membership any Bangladeshi citizen of 18 years old, not against the independence, sovereignty, and integrity of the country, not involved to any anti- social activities can be a member of AL, BNP or JP, but JI membership is only limited to the Muslims. While discussing support base, Jahan points out, although political parties tend to follow 'catch up' all strategy to enhance their support base, it is observed that AL has greater support base among religious and ethnic minorities, BNP has greater support from

civil and military bureaucracy and business groups, JP support base similar to BNP but it has greater support base in the northern districts of the countries and JI draws supports from Islamic urban groups as well as regional support in some of the border districts. Finally, it is argued that fragmentation of political parties takes place in Bangladesh because of the personal ambitions of leaders either to gain or retain power and party building strategy of military rulers.

Chapter four analyzes the state of the internal democratization of the parties. Jahan held that absence of democratic norms among major political parties are obvious. Party chairpersons are often found to be autocratic in running parties, alternative thoughts are not accommodated. Jahan argues that national council meetings had increasingly become a rubber stamp in the hands of the party president (P. 137). She provides evidence how quite undemocratically BNP Chairperson expelled Mannan Bhuyan from the party in 2007. Even nomination of the candidates is selected by the central leaders without consulting the grass- root leaderships. Furthermore, decision-making bodies of major parties (except AL) are dominated by men, Muslims and people belonging to higher socio- economic status (p. 151).

Finally, the author suggests some actions to promote party democracy and state of democratization in Bangladesh. For internal democracy within parties, she recommends, political parties should follow their own constitutions and Representation of the people Order (RPO) guidelines, voice of the grass- root leaderships needs to be listened, social diversity needs to be enhanced, sources of party funds should be made public, and parties require taking steps to propagate party ideologies. For overall democratic promotion, political parties should stop using state agencies and resources to reward supporters or punish the opponents, discontinue using violent means of protest, need to separate party organization and government and so forth.

The book is an impressive contribution to the literature that enriches political science in Bangladesh. Jahan quite authoritatively presents many untold stories of political parties in Bangladesh, enlightens us with persuasive arguments and provokes new thinking. Jahan has emphasized the issue of personal ambition in splitting the political parties of Bangladesh, however, one may not agree with this point necessitating a further investigation into the issue of ideology in the context of political parties of Bangladesh.

### **Author (s) Biography**

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