Problems of Democratic Consolidation in Bangladesh
A Cultural Explanation
Taiabur Rahman*

Abstract: 
This paper embarks upon the cultural landscape of Bangladesh society in the light of cultural theory as propounded by Thompson et al. (1990) and Hofstede (1997, 2001) in a bid to grapple the consequences of prevailing dominant culture on Bangladesh society and body politic. The cultural theories of Thompson and Hofstede which are generally considered complementary are used as analytical lens to address the issue. The paper attests that Bangladesh is predominantly a hierarchical society broadly characterized by strong collectivism and masculinity as well as high power distance and uncertainty avoidance. It also envisages that Bangladesh falls short of being a full-blooded hierarchic society. Along with hierarchic feature, Bangladesh shares several key characteristics of fatalistic dimension of sociality, which convince us to term Bangladesh as Hierarchic-Fatalistic (H-F) society. The consequences of hierarchical culture on Bangladesh society and body politic are live and substantial in influencing and shaping the functioning of the country’s key political institutions as well as the behavior of the major actors. It can thus help diagnose and explain many failings of Bangladesh’s relentless and tiring endeavor towards consolidating democratic governance in Bangladesh. Pathologies such as factionalism, nepotism, centralization, fatalism, relaxed accountability mechanisms for the superiors, elitism are some manifestations of the dominant hierarchical culture in Bangladesh. The country’s destructive political culture which is premised on the prevalent hierarchical configuration and values of the society is a serious threat towards ushering democratic ethos among the citizenry as well as a serious setback to the strengthening and consolidation of democratic governance in Bangladesh.

After the restoration and resumption of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh in end of 1990, the people of Bangladesh expected a distinguishing mode of governance, which would sharply contrast with the previous military and semi-military regimes. However, the nascent democracy is yet to take firm roots in the country as successive elected governments have failed to deliver the fruits of democracy to the people as the basic functions of a polity and national interests were often compromised over party interests. Bangladesh may have achieved electoral democracy through free, fair and participatory elections but liberal democratic practices are yet to be institutionalised within the polity and its effects are reflected in governance practices in the country.

* Assistant Professor. Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka
Although Bangladesh has achieved remarkable improvements in socio-economic spheres over time, deteriorating law and order and rampant corruption persist. Of late, Bangladesh has been ranked 17th among 60 weak and failing states in terms of their vulnerability to violent internal conflicts (Foreign Policy, 2005: 56). This has ignited heated debate among the local and international intelligentsia as many challenge such ranking as there is widespread suspicion about the validity of the methodology and findings of this research. However, this points to the underperformance and many failings of Bangladesh as a nascent democracy. What are the impediments that stand the way of Bangladesh from becoming a liberal democratic nation? While a number of key variables such as economic underdevelopment, the chequered history of politics and under-institutionalization of key political institutions can vie for explanation of Bangladesh's failings, the focus of this paper is on culture. The influence of culture on the society and politics of Bangladesh has not yet received much scholarly attention and yet to be examined in a systematic manner. This paper contributes to fill this void.

This paper depicts the cultural landscape of Bangladesh society in the light of cultural theory as propounded by Thompson (1990) and Hofstede (1997, 2001), which are generally considered complementary in a bid to comprehend the consequences of prevailing dominant culture on Bangladesh society and body politic. What are the broad general cultural characteristics of Bangladesh society? What may be the dominant way of life in Bangladesh as posited by Thompson? Where does Bangladesh stand according to Hofstede's four national cultural dimensions? How do the broad cultural attributes of Bangladesh society influence and shape political institutions and the behavior of politicians and other major groups across the society? These are the enquiries to be addressed in this paper. Let us begin with cultural theory which will be applied eventually to interpret culture's role and consequences on Bangladesh society and body politic.
Grid-group Cultural Theory

Grid-group Cultural theory, is an approach that has been developed over the thirty years in the works of British anthropologist Mary Douglas and Michael Thompson, the American political scientist Aaron Wildavsky and many others (Douglas 1982, 1992; Wildavsky 1987; Grendstad 1995; Thompson et al., 1990, 1999; Ellis and Thomson 1997; Rayner and Melone 1998; Ward 1998; Hood, 1996,1998).

The basic tenet of Grid-group Cultural theory is that the most important factor in people's life is how they want to relate to other people and how they want others to relate to them (Grenstad 1995). Culture is about how organization works, or groups behave, not just what happens inside an individual's head. The theory explains how people in a society derive a limited range of answers to basic social questions such as: How does the world work? What are humans really like? To whom are we accountable? (Wildavsky 1987:6). Grid-group theorists argue that people's answers to these questions produce orientations towards two basic dimensions of sociality:

**Group**- denotes the extent to which people in a society believe that they belong to particular social groups.

**Grid**- refers to people's perception of appropriate extent and variety of rules in a society. In other word, do people believe that social behaviour should be (is) determined largely by rules (informal or formal) or is there greater leeway for them to determine which behavior is appropriate? (Christensen and Peters, 1999:138).
**Figure: 1: Four ways of life**

| High (Group) | High (Collectivism) | Egalitarian (Equality) |
|--------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| High Grid    | Hierarchical        | Egalitarian            |
| High Group   |                      | Individualistic (competition) |
| Low Grid     | Fatalism (Apathy)   |                        |

**Source:** Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky (1990).

The answers to these two crucial questions: 'who are we' (group) and 'what shall we do' (grid), have a profound consequences for major decisions people make (Wildavsky cited in Grendstad, 1995:101). In any society, these two dimensions can vary from low to high, thereby result in four main ways of life.

Hierarchical- (high grid/high group) is characterized by strong group membership with strong systematic prescriptions. For hierarchists, stratification is an inescapable part of social organization (Coughlin and Lockhart, 1998:41). Order is the ultimate goal, which is sustained and upheld by wide application of rules and regulations. (Lockhart 1999:868).

Egalitarian- (low grid/high group) is characterized by strong group membership and few systematic prescriptions. The absence of effective and enforceable societal rules, in turn, appears to require consensual decision-making within the group (Christensen and Peters, 1999:139).

Individualistic- (low grid/low group) is characterized by weak systematic constrains and absence of binding group membership. Individualists view humans as self-interested and broad in capacities (Couhglain and Lockhart, 1998: 38). Individualists therefore appear to correspond to the familiar model of economic man as utility maximizers relatively unconstrained by collective rules and norms (Christensen and Peters, 1999:138).
Fatalistic- (high grid, low group) is characterized by strong systematic prescriptions and no group membership. The fatalists have little control over their own life (Christensen and Peters, 1999:139). Fatalism is a passive way of life and experience of involuntary exclusion (Jensen, 1998:123).

In any society, all ways of life may coexist in a dynamic pattern of attraction and separation particularly at the individual level (Thompson, 1996:9). No way of life is entirely prominent in an individual's everyday life and idea of herself or himself and the world. However, most individuals find themselves inhabiting one way of life more than the others (Thompson et al., 1990: 267). The same is not the case with a society or a nation. The way of life of people (values, norms and culture) in a society or country is almost stable and enduring. One major constraint of switching from one way of social life to another is that varied modes of life not only produce different world views, but also produce and warrant different individual and social skills (Jensen, 1998:137-138). It is time consuming and gradual. People who are predominantly accustomed to hierarchical way of life cannot delete their social conviction and values overnight or over year even over decades and switch to individualistic way of life. So majority of the people in a society are used to inhibiting one way of life, which shapes and affects the life of people in that particular society. Now let's have a look into another prominent cultural theory given by Hofstede which is more empirical in its quest for gauging the influence of culture on institutions and institutional actors.

**Hofstede's Four Dimensions of Culture**

One of the most recent studies which addressed the question of influence of culture on organizational structure/performance was conducted by Hofstede (1997, 2001). In his investigations into the work-related attitudes and values of managers working in IBM in more than fifty countries and three regions, Hofstede was able to put together an impressive analysis of the cultural variations between nationalities (Tayeb, 1988:38-39; Handy 1993). He ended up with four cultural dimensions:
Power distance: It is conceptually related to concentration of authority (centralization). It indicates the extent to which a society accepts that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally. Some national and regional cultures are characterized by large inequality, concentration of power in the hands of small and permanent elite, centralized organizations with tall hierarchical pyramids, and restricted upward communication. Some national and regional cultures are characterized by small inequality, more social mobility, less concentration of power in the hands of small elite, decentralized organizations with flatter hierarchies and relatively free upward communication.

Uncertainty avoidance: It is related to structuring of activities (formalization, specialization, and standardization), and indicates the lack of tolerance in a society for uncertainty and ambiguity. This expresses itself in higher levels of anxiety and energy releases, greater need for formal rules and absolute truth and less tolerance for people or groups with deviant ideas or behaviors. Some cultures represent higher levels of activity and personal energy. The more active culture tends to apply more specialization, formalization and standardization in their organizations. They put higher value on uniformity and are less tolerant of and interested in deviant ideas. They tend to avoid risky decisions. The less active cultures attach less importance to formal rules and specialization, are not interested in uniformity and are able to tolerate a large variety of different ideas. They more easily take risks in personal decisions.

Individualism/collectivism: Individualism refers to a loosely-knit social framework in society in which people are supposed to take care only of themselves and their immediate families; collectivism is one in which they can expect their relatives, clan, or work organization to look after them. More collectivist societies call for greater emotional dependence of members on their organizations. In a society in equilibrium the organizations in turn assume a broad responsibility for their members.

Masculinity/Femininity: The predominant pattern of socialization in almost all societies is for men to be more assertive and for
women to be more nurturing. Various data on the importance of work goals show near consistency on men emphasizing advancement and earnings as more important; women underpin quality of life and people higher. With respect to work goals, some societies are nearer to masculinity end of the masculinity1 femininity dimension, others nearer the femininity end.

If we juxtapose these two pioneering works of Thompson and Hofstede, we will find some sort of congruence between and among different dimensions of their works. The combination of uncertainty avoidance and individualism reminds us of Douglas's taxonomy of Grid and Group. Group clearly corresponds to individualism in the sense that high group represents the collectivist end of the scale. Grid resembles uncertainty avoidance: high grid stands for "a system of shared classifications". (Hofstede 1991:325)

The society in which the degree of power distance and uncertainty avoidance is high, and masculinity coincide with collectivity, may resemble to hierarchic one. Where these dimensions of societal configuration are reverse (power distance and uncertainty avoidance is low and femininity coincides with individuality), the society seems to be close to individualistic one. The society, which contains masculinity and collectivity as dominant dimensions and is characterized by high uncertainty avoidance and long power distance, is compatible with the fatalism as espoused by Thompson. Egalitarian society shares the features of collectivity and femininity as dominant dimension followed by low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance.

**The Consequences of Hierarchic Culture on Bangladesh Society and Politics**

Although religiously, ethnically and linguistically homogenous, the dominant cultural pattern in Bangladesh appears to be hierarchical (Kochanek 1993; Bertocci 1996; Hussain and Khan 1998). That implies that the society is characterized by high group values and high grid values. Individuals identify strongly with groups in
society and these groups aid to organize a great deal of day-to-day life in the country. The following is an attempt to figure out the dominant culture of Bangladesh in the light of the theories discussed above and then look at its consequences on Bangladesh society and body politic.

*High group-high Grid Feature*

The social dimension (grid) of Bangladesh society is heavily influenced and molded by the Hindu religious culture with its caste system and other ceremonial rituals as well as colonial heritage based principally on Master-slave (unequal relations) rapport. Social stratification and its manifestations on the organizations based on elaborate rules and hierarchy distance the elites from the common masses. On the other hand, Islam, the major religion of the country advocates egalitarian values, brotherhood, fraternity (group values), which has succeeded to arouse its wide appeal and acceptance among the masses irrespective of their religious affiliation. Hence high grid and high group- two contrasting values is present simultaneously in Bangladesh society. This is one of the instances of numerous manifestations of social dualism in Bangladesh.

**The Application of Hofstede's Notion of Culture**

The earlier discussion on group-grid dimension of Thompson and its relevance in Bangladesh society persuade us to consider Bangladesh as a collective society. From the family to the educational institutions and from educational institutions to work places, the traits of collective society are glowing. However collective norms are confined within groups. Further, Bangladesh is also predominantly a masculine society where the dominance and presence of males is widespread.

Uncertainty avoidance is also high in organizations and society in Bangladesh. Low trust across society is an illustration of this feature. Interpersonal trust outside immediate family is virtually on wane. Rather, group trust is largely confined to service based on mutual interest achievement. But this personal sense of trust is
Problems of Democratic Consolidation in Bangladesh: A Cultural Explanation

Taiabur Rahman

Shaky. Low levels of interpersonal trusts also promote factionalism and consolidate hierarchy and formal rules in organizations including political parties (Kochanek 1993; Jamil 1998).

In Bangladeshi organizations like the family, there is a high degree of power distance. Subordinates feel comfortable to work under superiors rather than with equals. Superior-subordinate relationships are characterized by protection, patronage and favor on the part of the superiors and respect, loyalty and compliance on the part of the subordinates. Deviant behavior and ideas are less encouraged. Opposing a superior's decisions or raising a question is often considered beyadobi (ill mannered). Proper manners comprising obedience and deference are very important in gaining access to patronage and favor. The essence of loyalty is order (Jamil, 1998:148).

According to Hofstede's cross-cultural study (2001), Bangladesh predominantly belongs to the hierarchical society which is shown in the following table:

**Table: 1: Cultural differences between nations according to Hofstede (2001)**

The higher the score, the stronger the dimension

| Cultural Dimensions      | Bangladesh | Index (Score) |
|--------------------------|------------|---------------|
|                          |            | Highest | Lowest | Mean |
| Power distance           | 80         | 104     | 11     | 58   |
| Individualism            | 20         | 91      | 06     | 48   |
| Masculinity-femininity   | 55         | 95      | 05     | 50   |
| Uncertainty avoidance    | 60         | 112     | 08     | 60   |

Source: Compiled by the Author from Hofstede (2001:502).

In short, according to Hofstede's features of national culture, Bangladesh tends to be a collective, somewhat masculine society with high power distance and uncertainty avoidance, which resembles to hierarchic one as posited by Thompson (1990).
Consequences of Hierarchism on Bangladesh Society and Politics

The consequences of hierarchism on Bangladesh society and politics have been interpreted under a number of sub-heads i.e. patron-client relations, Groupism/factionalism, Nepotism/favoritism, Lack of trust across group, Lack of compromise and consensus, Centralization of leadership, relaxed accountability mechanism for seniors and Elite groups as cartel.

Patron-client relations

One of the numerous manifestations of hierarchy in Bangladesh society is patron-client relations between two parties. Those people who have control over the mode of production, resource accumulation and resource distribution in the state are the patrons and the rest are clients. Dependency of vulnerable groups over the stronger group is a key feature of this patron-client relationship.

People of higher rank are accorded the right to extract labor, services and deference from the people of lower rank. People of lower rank in turn can expect material and other forms of supports from their patrons. Thus the system is hierarchically structured in a complicated maze of mutual obligations (Kochanek 1993:44). Thus patron-client relationships in Bangladesh are one of reciprocal obligations, but tend to work at the caprice of the patron which perpetuates inequality and corruption. An explicit instance of hierarchical characteristic of Bangladesh society is demonstrated by the constant 'siring' of the official seniors, which degrades the subordinates and aggravates the disparity in an already unequal relationship (Siddqui, 1996:9).

Groupism/ Factions

Although Bangladesh is not inflicted with any major socio-economic cleavages, individual and group interests conflict in its unique mode are existent. If someone is convinced that his/her interest or achievement is threatened by someone or group, he/she will immediately try to blacken the image of the opponent and tend to approach to or form another group for furthering his /her own interests.
Rivalry and vulgar in-fighting has become commonplace in every walk of life in Bangladesh, including students' organizations, political parties, NGOs (Non-Government Organization), teachers' associations, journalist federations, labor unions, lawyers' forums, chambers of commerce and industries (Siddqui, 1996:20). This situation can be attributed to the interest conflicts of the contending parties and their affinity with politics. This sort of cynical conflicts and factionalism may be attributed mainly to uneven race among innumerable contenders for scarce resources who are averse to following the rules of the game.

In the political arena, defection of political leaders from one party to another and factionalism are widespread in Bangladesh. Data available on 318 members of parliament in the 7th JS reveals that 65 percent (200), MPs were associated and affiliated with a single party from the commencement of their political life, 34 percent have altered their political affiliation once and more. No data were available for the remaining 9 MPs (Rashid: 1997). Likewise, all political parties in Bangladesh are chronically plagued with factionalism. Apart from these explicit factions, there are covert factions and conflicts within all parties, which at times necessitate the intervention by the party chief.

**Nepotism/favoritism**

Corruption in the form of nepotism, favoritism, and bribery has become rampant in every walk of social life in Bangladesh (TI, 2005). A small elite group who are symbiotically intertwined with one another share the fruits of corruption among themselves at the cost of national advancement. Even the social value system, which once looked down on corrupt persons, is withering away because honesty with inadequate salary and higher status is becoming a liability for the honest public officials in Bangladesh.

*Tadbir* is widely practiced in Bangladesh. If an official refuses to entertain tadbir the tadbirclcar (who approaches tadbir) will approach him through his near and dear ones whom he cannot so easily turn down. In Bangladesh, tadbir is on the increase due to dominant mass belief that even the simplest things will not move
automatically. So tadbir is a useful lubricant to overcome bureaucratic obstacles, which accelerates the speed of getting things done.

If some one refuses to entertain tadbir he/she is sure to be criticized and abhorred by friends and relatives. Closely related to tadbir is political interference in postings and transfers of the civil servants themselves where the bureaucrats are the tadbirkars and the politicians are tadbir entertainer. In this maneuvering, the official concerned generally turns into an ardent supporter of the party in power in order to get the work done (Siddqui, 1996: 26-27 & 90). Thus in case of financial corruption, the group interests and norms appear to be prominent and grid values gets operative when tadbir comes to the forefront where the mode of mutual exchange between parties is not in cash but through favors.

*Lack of Trust across Group*

Low trust is a familiar feature of Bangladesh society. People at large do not believe that their fellow citizens are engaged in politics for reason of mutual benefits for the society. They are skeptical of their involvement in politics. Where social trust is high, non-government alternative to public administration emerge quite readily. Individuals feel that they can safely form organizations and allow that organization some control over the lives of the members (Peters 1995).

In Bangladesh, there are large numbers of professional collective bargaining agencies and NGOs but many of them have no autonomous identity and are tinged with political pigment. Interpersonal trust is service-oriented. Trust across services is low. Even within a service trust is confined to a few. Low interpersonal trust leads to centralization of authority. (Jamil, 1998:59). Reliance on formal rules and regulations also results from low trustworthiness. Low trust is a manifestation of both high power distance and uncertainty avoidance.

in general the Bangladeshis do possess a low and declining degree of trust in their political institutions and political leaders. All
political institutions including bureaucracy, army, political parties, media, the parliament, police and courts (to some extent) are getting politicized and hence their credibility and performance are being eroded in eyes of common people. People rather demonstrate relatively high trust in a non-partisan ‘Caretaker Government’ headed by a retired chief justice of Supreme Court in Bangladesh. No incumbent government enjoys trust in the political arena to hold a free and fair election because all the governments invariably are charged with rigging and irregularities in elections. People are disappointed and bewildered by the performance of the MPs in Bangladesh in legislation malting and oversight of government operations and hence do have low trust in parliament. The parliament very often suffers from the chronic problem of quorum crisis. The main opposition parties has been habituated to boycotting parliamentary sessions for long and sometimes for months and instead take politics to street and call hartal.

Although the legal system in Bangladesh (specially the lower courts) is not totally free from political interferences, people still have relatively high trust in higher courts. Even political issues, which were supposed to be resolved by the parliament, were very often referred to the Supreme Court for final decision. The issue of floor crossing of two opposition MPs in the 7th Parliament (1996-2001) or Jatiya Sangshad as it is locally known is an instance in this regard. On numerous occasions, failure to reach consensus on specific issues even in parliamentary committees rolled to supreme courts. People’s trust on political institutions in Bangladesh is low, which according to Peters (1995) in turn may strengthen administrative power vis-A-vis the political power.

*Luck of Compromise and Consensus*

In the political arena, compromise hardly takes place between the parties. The relationship between ruling party and opposition is characterized by a high degree of animosity and conflict. The party in power looks upon the opposition with suspicion while the opposition always opposes the government even on issues of national interest. The major two parties abhor and demonize each other and the chiefs of these parties have not been in direct talking
terms with each other since the restoration of democratic governance in Bangladesh in 1991. The opposition is not always allowed to ventilate their grievances and opinion in the plenary sessions, which in turn provoke them to stage frequent walkouts or boycott the Jatiya Sangshad (JS), and organize street protests (Ahmed, 1994: 394: Ahmed, 1997:90). Debates, criticisms are not welcome and treated as threats to party interests.

In fact the history of opposition political parties in Bangladesh is the history of oppression, intimidation and police harassment by incumbent governments. Innumerable instances could be given of how laws and the processes of justice have been muzzled or twisted to humiliate political opponents. The opponents are tempted with powerful positions, financial offer. If those soft approaches fail, the political oppositions are finally suppressed, silenced and managed by hard measures like police harassment or by mastans. After every changeover of governments, corruption charges had been brought by new ruling governments against the opposition. Consequently, the opposition is habituated to opposing everything proposed by government irrespective of its contents and utilities.

Due to lack of agreement between the two contending parties in Bangladesh, within two years covering the period 1995-96, 173 days of hartal were observed by the opposition party causing perpetual trauma to the economy and daily life of Bangladesh. Moreover, from 1996 to 2003 more than 100 days hartal was observed by the main opposition party in Bangladesh. According to official figures, one day's hartal incurs an estimated loss of (Bangladesh Taka) BDT 386 crores (5.5 million USD where 1 USD = 70 BDT) (Daily Star September 29, 2003). The 5th, 7th and 8th Jatiya Sangsad (JS) which came into being in free and fair elections have been turned into rubber stamp in the hand of the ruling party due to the conflict and lack of consensus and compromise between the ruling and the opposition political parties in Bangladesh. It is pertinent to note that the major opposition parties in the parliament resorted to boycotting the plenary sessions in the 5th, 7th and 8th JSs and called hartal off and on over major national issues, which required national consensus i.e.- form of
local government, foreign policy, appointment of incumbents in constitutional bodies, effective running of parliament, etc. due to lack of concurrence and healthy debate between the ruling party and the major opposition.

**Fatalistic Attitude**

Most of the Bangladeshis are driven by linear time perception. This reflects the fatalistic attitude of most Bangladesh people towards life, which is also based on seniority-juniority relations— with a perception that seniors are always right. People at large also run their day-to-day life on relaxed time perception. Deliberate delays in attending crucial meetings are commonplace among the Bangladeshis. Even people holding responsible positions including senior ministers are captive to this national idiosyncrasy as watches are perceived as ornaments not devices of production and efficiency. This sort of perception is reflected in Bangladesh people's promptness in making commitments/recommendations/prescriptions but negligence in implementing those commitments.

The adverse impact of unpredictable and uncontrollable cruelties of nature (floods, draughts, cyclones, etc.) and injustice and non-cooperation stemming of the governance system for the less affluent and left-out strata of the society and their inability to overcome it tend to drive them to be fatalistic. Moreover, people's religious belief on Takdir or Vhagga (unseen destiny which is regulated by Allah) contributes to a considerable extent to become fatalistic.

**Centralization of Leadership**

Each major political party is headed by a person who is all-powerful in the management of the party including the formation of central and executive committees. The party structure and committees are filled by nomination and not by election. (Ahmed, 1995:372).

None of the major parliamentary parties have made any distinction between the party wing and the parliamentary chapter. The party
leaders hold top positions in party, parliament as well as government machinery (if in power). The top leadership in each party also nominates the members of the parliamentary board, which selects candidates for parliamentary election. The role and views of constituency is marginal in this regard. In most cases, the central leadership imposes their decisions on the local branches of the party. The inclination towards concentrating all powers in the center makes the backbenchers vulnerable and subservient to the caprices of the central leadership (Ahmed, 1998:88-89). The basic qualification to get nomination in the parliamentary election is not party loyalty, political experience and commitment but wealth, influence, relationships and blessings of the central leadership. After getting elected as a member of parliament, the autonomy of the MPs is seriously constrained by the directives of the party and the party chief. Loyalty to party leadership becomes the capital for political career advancement as leaders need the reassurance of admiring followers. The followers are in turn dependent as they seek the security of either an understanding guru (a preceptor) or an idealized brotherhood (Pye, 1985:157). Intra-party dissent is almost prohibited. The decision of the party chief is usually universal and final. Suppression of discord among party workers is a major cause of factionalism and party defection.

Relaxed Accountability Mechanisms for the Seniors

The cultural template of the notion of accountability is ambiguous and bewildering in Bangladesh society. Patron-client relations profoundly affect the activation of accountability mechanisms in Bangladesh. The relationship between father-children, teacher-student, senior official-subordinate official, husband-wife, housewife-maid servant, landlord-tenant, rich farmer-marginal peasant, educated-uneducated, ruling party-opposition party are based on the key notion of Boro-Choto (superior-inferior). There remains no viable mechanism for ensuring accountability of the senior or stronger group/patron and hence no effective sanction is devised for them. This discrimination is prevalent and accepted across the whole society.

The rank and status of a minister in the social hierarchy in
Bangladesh is quite high. He/she belongs to the elite strata of the society usually with reputed and affluent family background, long experience in politics and highly developed social and political network. A minister is likely to have access to any person, institution irrespective of its nature and form. The government backbenchers who constitute the majority membership of parliamentary committees (entrusted with oversight of the executive) in Bangladesh may find it awful and risky for future career development to call for accountability of a minister and his/her ministry. The minister is treated as a father figure and to interrogate the minister vigorously in committee sessions might be taken by the minister as an overt disregard towards him. High deference towards superiors prevails and viable mechanisms are discouraged to call seniors to account. No effective sanction is enforced even if they are found guilty of wrongdoing.

Now we will have a look at the comparative competency strength of MPs and bureaucracy to determine who is superior to whom in what respects. Background characteristics MPs are depicted in Table-2. These characteristics are analyzed in terms of education, occupation and parliamentary experience. In the 5th parliament 38 percent of the MPs had postgraduate degrees while 46 percent had graduate degrees. In the 7th parliament 40 percent of the MPs had postgraduate degree while 45 percent had graduate degrees. Most of the MPs have general educational background rather than specialized background in law, politics and administration (Rashid 1997; Rashid and Firoz 2001).

MPs with business as the occupational background constitute the largest elite group in the 5th and 7th parliament (59.4% in 5th JS, 47.8% in 7th JS and 45.7 in the 8th JS). In the 8th parliament, only 11.7 percent (18.8% in the 5th JS and 14.8% in the 7th JS) of the MPs are lawyers and 2.3 percent (2% in the 5th JS and 3.1% in the 7th JS) are politicians who are believed to be more knowledgeable than others in legislation, politics and administration. A considerable portion 40%) of the MPs who entered the parliament in 1990s (58.8% in the 5th JS, 39.9% in the 7th and 25.4% in the 8th JS) were new and inexperienced with the basic operations of
parliament let alone the specialized assignments in committees. They were not catered any specialized training on legislative and administrative affairs. Even the committee members in the 8th JS with the parliamentary experience of earlier JS had only seen the active operations of committees in the 5th and 7th JS.

Table: 2: Background characteristics MPs

| Background         | 5th JS (1991-1996) N=330 | 7th JS (1996-2001) N=318 | 8th JS (2001-2006) N=300 |
|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| **Education**      |                          |                          |                          |
| Post graduate      | 28.8%                    | 40.3%                    | 45.6%                    |
| Graduate           | 43.3%                    | 45.3%                    | 43.7%                    |
| Under graduate     | 27.9%                    | 13.5%                    | 8.4%                     |
| Others             | 0.9%                     | 2.3%                     |                          |
| **Occupation**     |                          |                          |                          |
| Businessmen        | 59.4%                    | 47.8%                    | 45.7%                    |
| Lawyers            | 18.8%                    | 14.8%                    | 11.7%                    |
| Professionals      | 15.5%                    | 8.5%                     | 10.6%                    |
| Landholders        | 3.9%                     | 6.9                      | 2.3                      |
| Politicians (Full time) | 2.0%              | 3.1%                     | 2.3                      |
| Others             | .4%                      | 18.9%                    | 27.4%                    |
| **Parliamentary Experience** |                 |                          |                          |
| Newcomer           | 58.8%                    | 39.9%                    | 25.33%                   |
| Experience of one JS | 21.8%              | 26.7%                    | 25.67%                   |
| Experience of more than one JS | 13.9%           | 33.4%                    | 46.67%                   |
| Not available      | 5.5                      | -                        | 2.33                     |

Source: Calculated and compiled by the author from Maniruzzaman (1992), Rashid (1997), Ahmed (2002), TIB (2004).

Now in order to compare the competency of MPs with bureaucrats, let us have a look inside bureaucracy. Most of the permanent secretaries in charge of different ministries are well educated and some hold higher degrees from overseas universities. They have undergone intensive probationary and in-service training after their entrance to the civil service. They have vast experience (25 years or
more) in running administration under diversified civil and military regimes. Bureaucracy essentially means domination through information. The autonomy of bureaucracy will be higher if bureaucratic decisions are shielded from external sources i.e. like politicians, citizens, academics, voluntary organization and the like (Olsen 1983). A survey conducted by Jamil (1998:108) reveals that bureaucratic decisions in Bangladesh are mostly available from internal sources such as superiors, colleagues, juniors, official circulars and gazettes rather than external sources. This data evinces bureaucrats' stronghold over information.

It is evident from the comparison between bureaucracy and the parliament that the bureaucrats are relatively in an advantageous position than the MPs in terms of stable career, expertise/collective knowledge borne of formal education, intensive training and professional experience, monopoly on practical information, numerical strength and material resources accumulation (Olsen, 1983:143, Rosen, 1998:79). Moreover, bureaucracy still seems to be better institutionalized than the parliament as an institution which is explained elsewhere (Rahman 2000). Hence the MPs are lagging behind the bureaucrats in terms of major competency components, which deter the committee members to establish command over bureaucracy and thereby hold them accountable for their decisions and actions. (Weber cited in Rosen 1990:79).

Hence from the standpoint of prevalent cultural value of superior-inferior position of bureaucrats and MPs, the MPs are lagging behind the bureaucrats in almost all respects. Culturally, MPs are supposed to be in a better position to hold the bureaucrats accountable. The reality is contrary to the cultural expectations. In this circumstance, it becomes a formidable task for parliamentary committee members to make the bureaucrats accountable depending on legitimacy gained through election only. The cultural value of devising no viable mechanism for ensuring accountability of the senior or stronger group is reflected on the formal arrangement of committee system and its real-world implication in ensuring bureaucratic accountability. The institutional rules for running parliamentary committee are devised in such a way, which
place the incumbent government in a convenient position to be the final arbiter of any issues of accountability.

The cultural value depicts that ruling party (government) is always superior to the opposition parties. Even after 1990, democratically elected governments had brought about some changes in the institutional rules of committees keeping an eye on their own convenience, which are inadequate to hold the bureaucrats accountable. The cultural values of domination and non-accountability of ruling regimes was latent in their halfhearted endeavors to overhaul the committee system. They were scared of formulating robust rules for committee to hold the executive accountable which might bind the ruling elite to account for their own activities. Bureaucratic accountability is so inexorably related to political accountability and without ensuring political accountability it is almost impossible to ensure bureaucratic accountability by the parliamentary committees composed of elected political elites. Hence it was cultural values, which profoundly influence and shape ruling regimes to devise institutional rules that could enable it to be immune from accounting itself.

*Elite as a Cartel*

A hierarchical network cannot sustain social trust and cooperation (Putnam 1993:174) for the whole society. Consequently, mutual trust and symbiotic relations loom in small coterie groups who have no incentive to work for common well-being of the society and every incentive to indulge in costly and inefficient rent-seeking and pursuits of group interests only (Olson cited in Putnam 1993:176). The politicians, mastans, loan-defaulters, businessmen, parliamentarians, bureaucrats belong to a small elite group to serve the interests of one another. There is no polar capitalist class in the country that can strive to hold a brake on such elite groups from indulging in corruption.

A considerable percentage (approximately 9%) of MPs in the 7th JS belonged to the top bank-loan defaulter-coterie of the country.
MPs with business as the occupational background constitute the largest elite group in the 5th, 7th and 8th JS (59.4% in 5th JS and 47.8% in 7th JS and 45.7 in the 8th JS, see table-2). The politicians (MPs) are dependent on businessmen and mastans for party funds and muscle power to establish hegemony in the constituency. Many of the top bank-loan defaulting MPs were in different committees in the 7th JS who were entrusted with ensuring financial propriety and keeping watchful eyes on the executive. For example, 29 defaulting MPs held a total of 46 committee positions (9.4%) out of 472 positions available in the 7th JS. Among the loan defaulting committee position holders, 5 were cabinet ministers, 6 (13%) were committee chairmen in the 7th JS and 4 were former ministers (Financial Express, August 22, 1996; Rahman 2000).

Such a case regarding the politics-business in Bangladesh nexus is of high relevance here. The MPs of the parliament brought in 275 luxury cars from abroad costing the National Board of Revenue (NBR) over 28 million BDT in tax. Most of them sold then the cars to businessmen for BDT 1 million to 2.5 million a car. Selling cars like BMW, Cadillac, Porsche the MPs have made at least 5 million BDT. For their use, they however seem to prefer low-cost cars. This a gross misuse of their privileges and a glaring example of how interests of politicians and businessmen merge in a bid to maximize illegal profits at the cost of sacrificing national interests (Prothom Alo, April 5, 2006; Daily Star, April 7 &10, 2006).

The intervention of the Standing Committee on Ministry of Finance in the 7th JS in favor of a defaulter and taking the finance minister to task is a demonstration of the influence of defaulters on the political system. A survey on defaulted bank loans carried by BIBM (Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management) revealed that in sanctioning the loans ministers (most of them are MPs) influenced in 46 percent cases, MPs in 35 percent cases, ruling party leaders in 13 percent cases and CBA (Collective Bargaining Agency) leaders in 4 percent cases (Daily Star May 30, 2000). The use of committees to elicit official information for purposes of private benefits or to use the committee for putting pressure on public officials to realize some personal agenda has occasionally been in
For many other reasons other than the mentioned one, the committee members become the allies of bureaucracy.

For instance, the MPs spend a lot of money for election purposes and a lion's share of the funds is provided by the candidates themselves and their well-wishers, relatives and businessmen. When they become an MP, the foremost and inevitable expectation and goal of the MP appear to be how to recover and multiply the electoral expenditure. Now the MPs must approach to the bureaucrats who run the administration, banks and are guardian of the state resources accumulation and distribution. It might so happen that one of the MPs' senior colleagues/friends happens to be the executive head of a ministry who could play major role in promoting the interest of the bureaucrats in the ministry through promotion, transfer, and material gains. Thus, the MPs also enter in such patron-client transactions and recovering electoral expenditure becomes a prime motto of the elected representatives. Hence, the bureaucracy, the ministers, treasury bench committee members, the businessmen and the mastans consciously cooperate towards the purpose of indulging in corruption by making accountability mechanisms weak and perfunctory. Hence, being a partner of the small coterie group, it becomes a formidable task for the committee members to arrest corruption and ensure executive accountability until the decline or at least weakening of this vicious circle of symbiotic relations. Even a former World Bank country director Frederick T Temple expressed his worries openly over the commercialization and criminalization of politics and its derogatory impact on Bangladesh society.

**Conclusion**

Societal pathologies such as factionalism, nepotism, centralization, fatalism, relaxed accountability mechanisms for superiors, elitism are some manifestations of the dominant hierarchical culture in Bangladesh. A hierarchic society characterized by high group values underscores values such as collectivity, solidarity, fraternity, compromise/consensus, etc. which are present albeit of a different
manner (fatalism also strongly persists) in Bangladesh. Likewise, hierarchic society is typified by grid values which stress on informal and formal rules, which are mostly followed as a breach rather than observance. In that respect Bangladesh falls short of being a full-blood hierarchic society too. Bangladesh shares several features of fatalistic dimension of sociality, which convince us to term Bangladesh as Hierarchic-Fatalistic (H-F) society.

The consequences of hierarchical culture on Bangladesh society and body politics are crucial and enormous in influencing and shaping the functioning of the country's key political institutions as well as the behavior of the major actors in the society. This is why, culture does matter a lot and can help diagnose and explain many failings of Bangladesh's relentless and tiring endeavors towards establishing democratic governance in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is an extremely populated (140 million people inhabit in a land of 144,000 sq.km) and a scarce-resourced society where widespread disparities and discrimination coexist in dealing with the seniors/superiors vis-a-vis the juniors/inferiors which in turn foster intolerance, enmity, rivalry and vindication across the society. No substantial space is left for the juniors/inferiors to breathe in and breathe out in the social and political sphere. The tradition of accommodating the junior/opposition and sharing power with others is virtually absent in Bangladesh. The superior groups/parties on the other hand tend to suffer from occasionally losing their predominant positions (often through elections) and thus resort to all sorts of oppressive measures to weaken and destroy the opposition's strength. The junior parties also take on all sorts of legal or illegal measures to upset the superiors' position and occupy it. In Bangladesh which is a low trust society, the fighting/conflicting parties are sceptical to each other's intentions and have no respect for each other and are not habituated to following the rules of the game accordingly. The "winner-takes all" attitudes of the superiors is reflected not only in behaviour of the superiors towards the juniors, but also in setting rules for running all major institutions in the country including the electoral system (plurality), the parliament, judiciary, bureaucracy, armed forces,
local government, media and even the civil society. The rules are heavily biased in favour of the powerful/superior parties/groups in the society. Moreover, due to lack of trust across society, symbiotic relations has sprung up in small coterie/groups made up of the politicians, businessmen, parliamentarians, civil-military bureaucrats to serve the interests of one another. Thus there is no interested party (barring the opposition) left in the country that could strive to hold a brake on the legislature and executive from indulging in corruption and call upon them to account.

Thus the country's destructive political culture which is premised on the dominant hierarchical structure and values of the society is a serious threat towards ushering democratic ethos among the citizenry as well as a serious hindrance to the strengthening and consolidation of democratic governance in the Bangladesh.

Footnotes

1. Tadbir is a Bengali word which denotes the way some one approaches and compels a person of power and authority to take necessary steps to get his work done by capitalizing kinship, friendship and offering gifts, money etc. It is one mode of corruption.

2. The 13th amendment of Bangladesh Constitution provides that the incumbent government will hand over power to a Non-partisan Caretaker Government (NCG) headed by a former Chief Justice three months before each parliamentary election is due. The head of the NCG is supported by a council of advisors consisting of eminent professionals on the basis of political consensus. Its prime task is to conduct the national parliamentary election and handover the power to the newly elected government.

3. Hartal refers to standstill of public life manifesting in closure of shops/business concerns and stoppage of work.

4. Two MPs belonging to the main opposition BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) in the 7th JS became junior ministers in the
government cabinet defying the party's directives. Article 70 of the Constitution stipulates that if a member of parliament either resigns or votes against the party, which nominates him/her in the election, his/her seat would be declared vacant. The speaker declared that the MPs did not cross the floor because they neither voted vote against their party nor resign from the party. He refused to comply with BNP's repeated requests to refer the dispute over the floor crossing of two members who were elected on BNP's ticket to the Election Commission, which is the rightful institution to give a verdict when this sort of issue arises. The BNP took the issue to the high court which announced the actions of the two MPs ultra vires. Later, the Election Commission declared the two seats of the deviant MPs vacant on account of floor crossing.

5. Mastan is a vernacular term widely used to refer to those terrorists who are generally tamed by influential elite having connections with the political parties and live on toll collection money and shelter provided by a patron. They are not used to abiding by the law of the land.

6. It advocates that human beings in this world live in awe of an absolute God's judgment on the final day. When anyone tries to have an appointment with another Bangladeshi for the next day, the standard answer is (inshallah) "If Allah permits". The attitude is that future is at the disposal of an absolute God, not of mere mortals (Hayashi, 1988:25-29).
References

Ahmed, M. (1995) Democracy and the Challenge of Development: A Study of Politics and Military Interventions in Bangladesh. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

Ahmed, N. (1998), 'Reforming The Parliament in Bangladesh: Structural Constraints and Political Dilemmas', Commonwealth and Comparative Politics, 36(1): 68-91.

_____ (1997), 'Parliament-Executive Relations in Bangladesh', The Journal of Legislative Studies, 3(4): 70-91.

Bertocci, P.J. (1996), The Politics of Community and Culture in Bangladesh. Dhaka: Center for Social Studies.

Christensen, T. and Peters, B.G. (1999), Structure, Culture and Governance: A Comparison of Norway and the United States. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Coughlin, R. M and Lockhart C. (1998), 'Group-grid Theory and Political Ideology: A Consideration of their Relative Strength and Weaknesses for Explaining the Structure of Mass Beliefs Systems', Journal of Theoretical Politics 10(1): 33-58.

Daily Star, The .(2000), May 30.

Daily Star, The .(2006), May 30. April 7 & 10,

Douglas M. (1982), In the Active Voice. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

_____ (1992), Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory. London: Routledge

Ellis, R. J and Tompson, M. (eds.). 1997. Culture Matters: Essays in Honor of Aaron Wildavsky. Boulder: Westview Press.

Financial Express The.(1996), August 22.
Problems of Democratic Consolidation in Bangladesh: A Cultural Explanation

Taiabur Rahman

Foreign Policy (2005), The Failed State Index, July/August Issue, 149:56-66.

Grendstad, G. (1995), Classifying Cultures (Bergen: Los Sentret) Rapport 9502.

Handy, C. B. (1993), Understanding Organizations. London: Penguin Books.

Hyashi, F. (1988), Culture and Management in Japan. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.

Hood, C. (1996), 'Control over Bureaucracy: Cultural Theory and Institutional variety', Journal of Public Policy 15(3): 207-230.

(1998), The Art of the State: Culture, Rhetoric and Public Management. New York: Clarendon Press.

Hofstede, G. (1997), Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. New York: McGraw Hill.

(2001), Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Hussain, N.A and Khan, M.S. (1998), 'Culture and Politics in Bangladesh: Some Reflections' in A. Bayes and A. Muhammad (eds.), Bangladesh at 25: An Analytical Discourse on Development. Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 197-215.

Jamil, I. (1998), Administrative Culture in Public Administration: Five Essays on Bangladesh. Bergen: Los-Sentret. Rapport 9801

Jensen, L. (1998), 'Cultural Theory and Democratizing Functional Domains: The Case of Danish Housing', Public Administration, 76:117-139.

Kochanek, S.A.(1993), Patron-Client Politics and Business in Bangladesh. Dhaka: University Press Limited.
Lockhart, C. (1999), 'Cultural Contribution to Explaining Institutional Form, Political Change and Rational Decisions' Comparative Political Studies, 32 (7): 862-893.

Maniruzzaman, T. (1992), 'The Fall of the Military Dictator: 1991 Elections and the Prospect of the Civilian Rule in Bangladesh', Pacific Affairs, 65(2): 203-23.

Olsen, J.P. 1983. Organized Democracy: Political Institutions in a Welfare State- The Case of Norway. Oslo: University press.

Peters, B.G. (1999), Institutional Theory in Political Science: The New Institutionalism. London: Pinter.

_____(1995), The Politics of Bureaucracy. New York: Longman.

Prothom Alo The (2006), April 5, 2006;

Putnam, R.D. (1993), Making Democracy Work: Civil Traditions in Modern Italy. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Pye, L.W. (1985), Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimension of Authority. Cambridge, Mass : Belknap Press.

Rahman, M. T. (2000), 'The Role of Parliamentary Committees in Ensuring Bureaucratic Accountability in Bangladesh'- Unpublished MPhil Thesis. Bergen: University of Bergen.

Rashid A.(ed.) (1997), Pramanno Sangsad. Dhaka: Tatthya Seba.

Rashid, A and Firoz, M (2001), Pramanno Sangsad. Dhaka: Tatthya Seba.

Rayner, S. and Melone, E.L. (1998), Human Choice and Climate Change. Columbus, Ohio: Battele Press.

Rosen, B. (1998), Holding Government Bureaucracies Accountable. Westport: Praeger Publishers.

Siddqui, K. (ed) (1996), Towards Good Governance in Bangladesh:
Fifty Unpleasant Essays. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

Sobhan, R. 2000. 'The State of Governance in Bangladesh', The New Nation 1(571) (Internet Edition) http://www.nation-online.com

Tayeb, M.H. (1988), Organizations and National Culture: A comparative Analysis. London: Sage.

Thompson, M. Ellis, R.J and Wildavsky, A. (eds.) (1990), Cultural Theory. Boulder: Westview Press).

Thompson, M. (1996), Inherent Rationality. Report 9608 LOS Center Bergen.

Thompson, M., Grendstad, D. and Selle, P. (eds.) (1999), Cultural Theory as Political Science. London: Routledge.

Transparency International. (2004), Parliament Watch, 7-10 . Dhaka: TIB

Transparency International. (2005), Corruption Perception Index (CPI). Berlin.

Ward, V. (1998), 'Towards a Theory of State--non-state Actors: A Grid-group Cultural Approach', in Jacquin-Berdal D., Oros A. and Venveij M.(eds.) Culture in World Politics. London: MacMillan, 206-244.

Wildavsky, A. (1987), Choosing Preferences by Constructing Institutions: A Cultural Theory of Preferences Formation. American Political Science Review, 81(1):3-21.