CHAPTER 3

Salient Features of Bangladesh Politics

3.1 Introduction

The history of Bangladesh politics, presented in Chapter 2, reveals its salient features. Among these are: instability, violence, neglect of the parliament, dependence on street agitation, commercialization, and criminalization. This chapter discusses these features and explains their causes and interrelationships, while searching for approaches to improve Bangladesh politics.

Section 3.2 discusses the “instability” feature. As is clear from Chapter 2, Bangladesh is yet to have a stable democracy. Since independence, it has experienced three spells of military or quasi-military rule. Though the civilian government has been restored again, Bangladesh does not yet have an agreed upon institutional arrangement for holding election and transfer of power. This basic disagreement is serving as an important source of political instability.

Section 3.3 draws attention to the “violence” feature. The government changes in the initial years of Bangladesh all involved killing of leaders in power. Though this has not been the case since 1990, government changes still involve a lot of killing, through street agitation and other ways. A particular, recent variety of violence is of the jihadi source and generally terrorist in nature, often linked with foreign jihadi organizations. Bangladesh witnessed a deadly combination of jihadi elements of violence with conventional electoral violence on the eve of the election of the Tenth Parliament.

Section 3.4 discusses “dysfunctional parliament” as another feature of Bangladesh politics. The parliaments elected under military and quasi-military regimes did not have much legitimacy. Furthermore, they did not have much power, because first, these regimes relied on the presidential system of government and second, the real source of power lay in the cantonment. With the
restoration of the parliamentary system of government in 1991, parliaments regained power, but they remain ineffective as a forum of policy deliberation, because the Opposition generally boycotts the parliament. More recently, following the unusual election of the Tenth Parliament, the “real” opposition is entirely out of the parliament.

Section 3.5 discusses “reliance on street agitation” as the counterpart of the neglect of the parliament. Streets and highways are now the main theater of political action. Because of their disruptive effect on normal economic activities, violent street agitation is a threat to Bangladesh’s continued economic progress.

Section 3.6 draws attention to “commercialization” of Bangladesh politics. It notes that Bangladesh is going through the stage of “primitive capitalist accumulation,” and the state has emerged as the most important instrument for accumulating capital. As a result, business entrepreneurs and all those who want to get rich and accumulate capital quickly are interested in getting elected to the parliament and becoming ministers. Money is used to get elected so that the elected office can then be abused for making more money! The result is crass commercialization of politics.

Section 3.7 shows that the combination of commercialization, reliance on street agitation, and violence has led to “criminalization” of politics. In addition to money, one generally needs “muscle power” to be successful in the current style of Bangladesh politics. Those who supply such muscle power either already have criminal background or engage in criminal acts in the process of supporting particular politicians. The epitome of this process is the emergence of so-called “Godfathers,” who combine their political office with personal power to establish a stranglehold over their localities. They often do so by maintaining a retinue of armed cadres who impose their will in a manner not too different from feudal lords of the past. Section 3.8 offers some concluding remarks.

3.2 Instability

Instability has been a hallmark of Bangladesh politics. The country has moved back and forth between civilian and military (or quasi-military) rule. Only three years after independence, it went under prolonged military and quasi-military rule. It witnessed a brief spell of quasi-military rule even after restoration of the civilian government. Even now, there is no agreement among major political parties about the institutional arrangement for election and transfer of power. As a result, democracy in Bangladesh remains unstable.

Bangladesh began with constitutional rule. Despite all the political turmoil and other urgent tasks, Bangabandhu gave priority to drafting the