

BOOK REVIEW

Rehman Sobhan, *Bangladesh: Problems of Governance*, University Press Ltd., Dhaka, 1993, pp. 295+xii Tk. 400.00.

The concept of governance is relatively new although essentially it connotes several age-old concerns related to politics, administration and development. According to the Oxford dictionary, governance is "the act or manner of governing, of exercising control or authority over the action of subjects; a system of regulations". Therefore, study of governance is more than studying problems of government as such. It is in real terms a reflection on the quality, performance and effectiveness of the government. As there is still a dearth of materials on governance *per se*, study of governance warrants drawing upon concepts and issues from several disciplines: political science, economics, public administration, law, etc. In Bangladesh, as in the rest of South Asia, the term has yet to gain a wide use. The book titled *Bangladesh: Problems of Governance* written by Prof. Rehman Sobhan and published by UPL is a commendable attempt and indeed a pioneering work aimed at fulfilling the felt need for literature directly dealing with the subject. The handful of works on governance in this region that are available are found to be basically groping to formulate - as Rehman Sobhan puts it - certain universal concepts rather than interpreting abiding national realities. For Rehman Sobhan the understanding of governance is drawn from his experience of over three decades of his own professional life. He looks at governance as a reflection on the role of the state and the political regime in giving direction to the

development of the country. The approach suggests a paramountcy of the role of the state in the development process and direction of a nation's affairs, and hence the author takes governance as a measure of the nature and quality of policy choices of the state, its capability to implement these choices in relation to the political context which influences both choices and outcomes.

The study is essentially a historical account and is divided into five parts. In his introductory chapter on "Conceptual Issues" Rehman Sobhan provides a sketch of what is going to be found in the subsequent chapters. The author has avoided entering into any debate - which could be endless, though useful - on the conceptual issues relating to the subject as such. While this might be viewed as an area on which a second edition of the book or some further work on the subject may concentrate, the methodology adopted in the book has helped it cover the main aspects of the challenges facing governance in Bangladesh with a more functional and practical approach.

The second chapter titled, Political Context of Governance, is devoted to the analysis of the historical context in which the problems of governance in Bangladesh has evolved. It traces the political development of Bangladesh from the time of Pakistani rule through the period of Mujib, Zia and Ershad down to the fall of autocracy. Particularly informative and useful is the part on role of the interim government and the holding of free and fair elections in a background in which the entire institution of elections was shattered under Ershad. The General, according to the author, for holding on to power invoked the lowest common denominator in human nature where politics was seen as a part of a Hobbesian world in which political life was nasty, brutish and short. While the author hails the 1991 election with sufficient documentation as exemplarily free and fair, he also signals doubts as to whether the feat can be repeated in future elections to be held under an incumbent ruling party. He, therefore, suggests that there is what he calls "close to a political consensus in the country that a neutral interim government would be the best custodian for holding elections every five

years." This, as he points out, would require a constitutional amendment providing for dissolving the outgoing government in favour of placing a neutral administration to hold elections.

To the author the election helped the BNP which heretofore lacked political credibility emerge as a legitimate mass based party under the leadership of Mrs. Zia. Sobhan views Khaleda Zia's emergence as a political figure as one of the miracles of our time. He notes that comparable leaders such as Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto and Sheikh Hasina grew in political tradition. In contrast, the rise to political power of Khaleda Zia demanded a personality transformation whereby a housewife totally insulated from politics learned the way of the political world and steeled herself in the politics of both intrigue and struggle in the streets. He also quickly comments on the autocratic traits in her personality which in his opinion, ironically though, helped her party hold together and added to her credibility in the public minds.

The other point to note is the creation for the first time since the demise of the Muslim League in Bengal politics after 1954, the basis of a two-party system in Bangladesh. He views the prospect of a durable right of the centre party in BNP and a sustainable left of the centre party in Awami League and suggests that if this phenomenon can be consolidated the politics of coups and conspiracies can be helped to end.

In the next chapter titled "Failure of Democracy in Pakistan and Emergence of Bangladesh", the author goes back to his well-researched topic of how the denial of democratic processes impacted on the economic governance of the Pakistani state. He has published previously with greater detail elsewhere on the subject of economic disparity between East and West Pakistan - a subject that he took the lead in popularizing during the mid and late sixties which functioned as the economic rationale behind the 6 point and 11 point movements. The author in this chapter articulates how the denial of democratic rights to the people of East Pakistan became soon related to the sense of economic deprivation and how it became the catalyst in the Bengali nationalist movement culminating in the independence of Bangladesh.

In the next chapter Rehman Sobhan re-examines the role of the state in post-liberation period with specific reference to role of the private and public sectors in the economy. The author here reviews the initial circumstances and outcome of building a strong state sector and thereby a strong entrepreneurial class through state patronage. He also undertakes the critical evaluation of the subsequent moves towards privatisation by denationalization and here he re-affirms convincingly his already well-articulated and well-documented view that not all policies designed to promote private enterprise are appropriate nor do they have the intended outcome of liberating private initiative and capital for increasing production.

Closely related is the topic of the next chapter which is external influence that has conditioned the role of the state with particular reference to privatisation - one other topic of Prof Sobhan's sustained interest. The author here reviews, drawing upon some of his well-known works, the consequences of overriding external dependence on the character and behaviour of the state in general and on the direction of development policies in particular. The main argument here is that the donors' encroachments into the process of managing the economy derives largely from Bangladesh's own failure of governance - and the author attributes this to the pervading resource gap as a result of the failure to generate internal resources. The return of the democratic process is viewed as an opening of prospects for the reduction of external dependence. This, however, would be contingent upon the capacity of the political authority to make effective use of resources and opportunities and to build a democratic consensus to reassert on the question of national sovereignty.

The sixth and final chapter interprets the character of the Bangladesh state today which he says "is not so much over or misgoverned but is barely governed at all". He also offers a stimulating discussion of the implications of the opportunities provided by the democratic transition *vis-a-vis* the prevailing constraints towards building a political consensus which can underwrite the sustenance of a democratic polity.

As one finishes reading the book one finds three main issues recurrently coming into focus: the problem of self-rule and democracy; the role of the public and private sector in development; and the perpetuation of external dependence. The main argument is that the denial of self-rule and subsequent erosion of democratic choice for the people of Bangladesh contributed to the lack of accountability in the process of governance. The lack of accountability, according to the author has diverted politics and development towards the enrichment of a narrow class of beneficiaries at the expense of public welfare. On the other hand, external dependence perpetuated this process since the state has depended more on the donors to sustain the development efforts than on the people. As a result the successive governments became less and less accountable to the people and more and more on the donors in order to retain state power.

As mentioned earlier, the topic covered by the book is extremely wide and it does leave several aspects related to governance understressed. These include, for example, questions of accountability and transparency which are indispensable from the point of view of ensuring efficient administration. One could also cover such issues as rule of law, fair and accessible judicial system, independence of the media and dissemination of information, etc. But then no study on a subject like governance can possibly ever be complete. The credit of Rehman Sobhan's book is that it is not only the maiden venture on the study of governance but also a very articulate expose on the political economy of governance, and a well-documented historical study on the subject. It is indeed an indispensable reading for people interested in most of the vital aspects of Bangladesh's problems and challenges in the past, present and future.

Reviewed by
Iftekharuzzaman, Research Director, BIISS