**The Bangladesh comparison**

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Bangladesh celebrated its 52nd independence this month. Despite it being many years younger than Pakistan, on all development indicators it is doing better than Pakistan. How?

Bangladesh does not have particularly strong institutions and has a weak governance structure. Corruption and poverty still loom and inequality, similar to global trends, is increasing. The political system is largely controlled by two political parties that are dynastic in their composition. Whatever the government in power, their focus, like Pakistan, seems to be on shutting down their political opponents. This resonates well with Pakistan’s political and institutional landscape. Yet all social and economic indicators show Bangladesh far outdoing Pakistan.

Many Pakistani economists and social scientists have discussed this topic, attributing two main reasons for why Pakistan is behind Bangladesh. First, regardless of a political system fraught with problems, Bangladesh has not had military dictators in power; Pakistan has had four since 1947. The role of the military in Bangladesh is minimal and completely removed from politics. In Pakistan, it is only very recently that we have had no outright military interference, though we are far from indirect political interference and influence. Second, in comparison to Pakistan, many more girls go to school in Bangladesh and hence more women participate in economic activity and contribute towards economic growth.

There is also always discussion on what Pakistan needs to do to improve development indicators. There have been various op-ed pieces that discuss how institutional strengthening is a necessity to change Pakistan’s fate, as opposed to leadership change as argued by the author. Others have argued the importance of removing the stranglehold from elite control to achieve success.

In wider debates as to why some countries do better than others there is the view that a liberal democratic system, with strong, inclusive, and responsive institutions, is the fundamental reason for why some countries do better than others. Theoretically, this argument doesn’t consider the historic colonial and imperial control and extraction by many Western countries that leaves generational gaps in resources and governance. But practically as well, examples of countries such as Bangladesh and Tunisia defy this argument, at least to the point that these countries are showing upward progress despite not being strong liberal democracies as understood in the Western sense.

Going back to analyzing Bangladesh’s success, the underpinning of it all is examining budget allocation towards education and health in comparison to their defence budget. The comparison between Bangladesh and Pakistan in this should tell us where our priorities lay.

Bangladesh has largely been successful in ensuring that radical religious viewpoints do not gain airtime; it has a secular national identity, which was a founding principle. Religion and religious groups are not nourished with resources and space to become radical and hold society to ransom in the name of religion. Pakistan has allowed all of this, and its cultural and ethnic richness seems to be constantly in conflict with religion.

It is also a more homogeneous society, where language and culture are similar throughout the country, resulting in fewer conflicting interests. Instead of recognizing Pakistan’s cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity as a strength to build upon we allowed a resource allocation imbalance where Punjab gained at the expense of all other provinces. We have been unfortunate in not being able to address this imbalance despite the 18th Amendment and decades of this status quo will require dedicated provincial representation, and need I say, ‘more democracy’, to put things right.

In terms of economic policies, successive Bangladesh’s governments have ensured inclusivity and a long-term approach towards development. A good example is the prioritization of childhood education. A focus on effective policy education has direct and indirect benefits – less mother and child mortality and malnourishment; women’s contributions to economic growth and decrease in gender inequality.

A consistent and focused investment in the textile industry has also paid off, with Bangladesh second in the global garment export market. Though a critique of Bangladesh’s politicians is that they do not encourage focus on people’s mobilization and organizing, compared to, for example, India. There is instead a green light to NGOs to deliver on services (which the government would otherwise be providing) such as health and education. Despite this, there are active labour unions within the textile industry that lobby both the national government and international importers.

Pakistan needs to decide what it wants to achieve. A country that promotes and protects only the interests of the powerful, and in turn fails on all development indicators or one that learns from other countries such as Bangladesh on how to progress with common citizens at the forefront of all policymaking? One thing is clear, maintaining the status quo will and is already resulting in serious repercussions for the whole country.

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