

## **'Decentralization of 'Civil Society Mafias' and Coercive Politics' in Bangladesh**

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### **Abstract**

*The 'civil society' in Bangladesh is glorified as 'savior of democracy' for its intellectual contributions and active involvement in the mass upsurge of 1990. However, post-upsurge Bangladesh democracy ignited terrorism, gangsterism, subversive insurgency, homicidal political rivalry, corruption and conflict-ridden political venality over two decades (1991-2011). It is revealed through this applied sociological investigation that formation of the post-upheaval "civil society mafias" took place through transformation of civil society "pressure groups" of the pre-upsurge decades into political power-brokers. A unique feature of this political transformation is that the 'civil society mafias' coercive politics has established much deeper roots in the regions (periphery) than the capital (center)--a phenomenon coined in this paper as 'decentralization of coercive politics'. A conscious process of de-institutionalization of political institutions' through state patronization in the Ershad regime serves as the root cause of the 'decentralization of coercive politics'.*

**Keywords:** Mass upsurge, coercive politics, civil society, middle class, de-institutionalization.

### **Introduction**

Popular literature (Thindwa et. al., 2003; Keane 2003; Reuben 2003; Fatton Jr.1999) delineates four characteristics of the civil society. First, it is non-political or independent from government and the state; second, it bases on non-profit objectives; third, it is composed of organized people or groups and institutions; and four, it dedicates private effort for the public good such as social development and public interest. According to Keane (2003), the participants of the civil society are prone to exercise physical restraint, to mix non-violently with others, including foreigners' and strangers. Thus, terrorism, violence, or mafia thuggery have no place within civil society (Keane 2003:4). This author, being a political sociology student and civil society enthusiast, set out on an applied sociological research journey during 2005-2008 to investigate the state of allegiance of the civil society members with popular politics. The research outcome eventually turned into formation of a surrogate paradigm coined as 'civil society mafias'. Apparently this coining is contradictory. While civil society refers to organized networks of intellectually groomed socialites and patriots, "mafias" convey the opposite meaning referring to organized networks of anti-social human elements and crime syndicates. The following discussion attempts to resolve this contradiction as well as shed light on this never-heard-before phenomenon depicting a newer social construction per se.

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## **Objective, Background, Rationale and Research Method**

One of the objectives of this study is to examine compliance of the Bangladesh civil society with its globally acknowledged attributes. The other objective is to assess status, and scale and magnitude of civil society allegiance with party-politics, as well as to subjectively investigate the reasons of such allegiance. The rationality of the study lies in questioning of the popular perception that a strong civil society mobilization in the mass upsurge of 1990 contributed greatly in the fall of a decade-long pseudo-militaristic autocratic political regime (1982-1990), and establishment of democracy in Bangladesh.

The background of this study is worth elaborating in this discussion. Employing exploratory research method, I began with a key question-- why the newfound democracy go along with intensified terrorism, gangsterism, subversive insurgency, homicidal political rivalry, corruption and anarchic political venality? As well, why successive democratic governments have been being commonly criticized and blamed for escalating mafiaism in Bangladesh politics instead of marshalling politics of development?

As a preparatory measure, a reconnaissance opinion survey was conducted on 100 male and 30 female educated adult informants in Dhaka, Chittagong, and Noakhali. Of their responses against 20 different questions--3 were significantly intriguing, and thereby picked up as three proposition of this exploratory (fact-finding) research. 98% informants from both male and female respondents opined that 1) 'civil society is not civil but purely political in disguise', 2) 'civil society supplies the intellectual pulse for the mafias', and 3) 'civil society members in peripheral areas (regions and localities) retain much greater mafia-political allegiance and gangster attributes than those in the center (Dhaka)'. These perceptions led to the investigation of the reasons of civil society-mafia connection from a historical-political sociological perspective.

## **Field Observation: An Ethnographic Narrative of Study Background**

Considering the third perception as examinable, I began a follow-up research from Noakhali, my birthplace, covering greater Noakhali regions--Feni, Laxmipur and Maijdee. I met former school-friends, teachers of schools and colleges, religious leaders, journalists and lawyers, and members of literary and cultural organizations, and to gain understanding of their perception of civil society state in their localities.

Before 1990, I had been actively involved in literary and cultural and social activities of local civil society organizations. Revisiting my hometown in 2005 provided me with the opportunity to observe social changes from a comparative time-frame study perspective. Soon I discovered an appalling fact that many youths of my age, including some of my fellow-activists who had always dreamt of social well-being and worked for that goal at their younger ages, had become local mafia members. A school-teacher of mine portrayed a bizarre picture of widespread gangsterism, arms trade, drug trade, prostitution, addiction and trafficking and political party backed robbery, kidnapping, and forcible land encroachment and many other crimes that had been being

controlled and operated from behind the scene by so called “*samajsebaks*” (social workers), “*bhadraloks*” (gentlemen) and “*porishkar manush*” (very upright persons). I also came to know that these people had been holding powerful positions in various so-called social organizations, clubs and associations, as well as in governing committees of schools, colleges, charitable organizations and social institutions. These 'social workers in disguise' were maintaining a strong network with political power brokers, administrative offices, local government personnel and police, as well as supplying money, arms and drugs and manpower to local political elites. Yet, they were remaining invisible in public.

### Theoretical Proximity Analysis

John Gledhill, infamous political anthropologist, once portrayed images and roles of the *Caciques* or “local bosses” of Mexico (Gledhill 1994:108), and that a section of caciques was patronized and regarded through civil society members' false reverence and approval as populist visionaries. In Brazil and other Latin American countries such as Colombia, Peru, Chile and Bolivia, and some Caribbean states--in Haiti and Fiji, a section of cacique-types mafias are formed from within the so-called civil society. Jorge Barenstein (2003), while conducting field research on local governance in Bangladesh, portrayed a similar picturesque of “local bosses”. Barenstein introduced these people as “local robber barons” and “full-fledged godfathers, very much in Southern Italian mafia style” and depicted their “networks of corruption” (2000:13) with outlining their affiliation in civil society circles

In Bangladesh, civil society as an idea often remained tamed under the notion of power and authority of the civil governance. “Taming the Leviathan” (WB 1999) became a metaphor to denominate concerns of the countrymen seeking ways to the overpowered civil bureaucracy (Siddique 1996; Siddiqui 1996; Sobhan 1997) to prevent escalating damage to the country's political institutions. Allegiance and influence of party-politics on civil governance machineries are identified as barriers to accountability, transparency and good governance (Blair 1997; DFID 1998; Feldman 2003; Governance Coalition 2000). As well confrontational activity polarization by political parties is considered to pave the way to institutionalization of corruption (Rose-Ackerman 2000) in both civil and military bureaucracy (Hasanuzzaman 1998; Khan 2000; Muzaffer et al., 1999; Rahman 2000) settings. The corruption of civil and military governance, and erosion of political culture hindering democratic transition (Khan et. al 1996; Khan 1995; Kotchak 2000) prompted international actors i.e., donors and development partners, to shift focus on citizens' initiatives (Holloway 1998; Huq 1996; Hye 2000; Mukherjee et. al., 2000). NGOs are hailed as dependable partner-base throughout the nineties (Siddique 1998; Stiles 1999; Wood 2000). Involvement of other actors from intelligentsia and media gradually formed the foundation of Bangladeshi civil society at the center. But taking advantage of decentralized civil bureaucratic corruption machinery, civil society emerged as a despotic 'civil society mafia' in the periphery.

In order to clarify the apparent contradiction in the terminology of “civil society mafias”, civil society and civil society mafias deserve a definitive and attributive discussion. Civil society is defined as “voluntary associations, organizations, movements and networks that live and work in

the social space outside the state and the private sector” (Rahman 2004:41). In general, civil society entails a broad spectrum of organized civic groups, clubs and associations, and networks other than business firms and political parties in society. For example, academics and intelligentsia, universities, policy institutions and the media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), indigenous peoples' collectives, environmental activists, volunteer and charity groups, parents and teachers associations, senior citizens groups, sports clubs, arts and culture groups, faith-based and 'issue-based' activist groups, workers' clubs and trade unions are considered to be the actors in the civil society.

Are all these civil society members essentially civil or pro-people? Reuben writes: “not all forces present in civil society play a positive role in development. There are organizations which are opposed to social change and technological innovation, there are others which are in favor of social or cultural segregation, and still others linked to drug trafficking or economic mafias” (2003:3). My research finding endorses this reality, and proves hypothetical perception of reconnaissance informants that civil society mafias at regional levels practice much greater coercive politics (than those in the city areas. A school-teacher termed this transformation as the 'decentralization of hegemonic centrality' which means that once' centralized or concentric hegemony began to disperse, and diverge and expand to make its room in small regional spaces. Then the question appears into fore--what are the reasons behind the emergence of civil society mafias?

### **Analysis of the Research Outcome**

In the Bangladesh context, the military rule and autocratic regime sowed the seeds of civil society mafias. It is revealed that there is a correlation between the military interventions in Bangladesh politics and the emergence of the civil society mafias.

During the Ershad regime (1982-1990), social well-being rarely appeared to be a reason for the emergence of civil society organizations. Rather, they emerged for two reasons: 1) need of a civil-dressed platform to endorse and validate undemocratic governance and military oppression as 'pro-people', 'people-centered' or 'evil hunting' for greater common good'; and 2) pocket lucrative state funding packages--often through community-based 'social development' incentives labels.

The military rulers (throughout the world), suffering from the crises of popular rejection for illegitimate intervention on politics, adopt two strategies: 1) depoliticization of society, and 2) legitimization of its intervention (Perlmutter 1979; Finer 1977). Militaristic depoliticization strategies follow banning of political parties and suppression of political activists through state sponsored violence and oppressive measures. As political activists hide, the civil societies tend to fill up the political vacuum. In the Bangladesh context, Ershad's assent to ruling power and banning of political activities had forced political activists to take refuge under civil society umbrellas in disguise of activists. Such civil societies were composed of collectives of political party workers, and not of social workers.

The initial setback for Ershad was that his intervention in civil governance had no political legitimacy, because the military was not entitled to rule but to promote a “noninterventionist attitude toward politics” (Perlmutter 1979:8). As per civil political ethics of modern nation-states, the military is excluded from politics. Huntington stated: “politics is beyond the scope of military competence” (1957:71), and Amos Perlmutter considered the military to be a strictly non-political state apparatus engaged solely to safeguard national sovereignty and independence (1977:8). Ershad made his first attempt to overcome lack of constitutional legitimacy through creation of an ideology in support of his regime.

The first attempt he made was elimination of the civilian contempt for the military mind” through ideological indoctrination of citizens of Bangladesh. As opinions of intelligentsia and the activism of youths had enormous appeal among common people of Bangladesh society, he resorted to buying civil society ideologues and intellectuals to engage them in writing and performing ballads of his greatness and patriotism in the national media. Soon he heavily funded for the formation of hundreds of civil society organizations in the name of accomplishing objectives of social welfare, youth development, literary and cultural development, sports development, community development and research and policy analysis. Opportunist intellectuals were gifted with highly salaried positions in these “official” civil societies (to be said in a Gledhill fashion). As well, he endeavoured to gain popularity, using people’s religious sentiment. Islamic civil societies increased in number during his regime.

These unique strategies of blending militarism with intelligentsia indeed turned him into a part of intelligentsia—in Janowitz’s term, the “intelligentsia in uniform” (Janowitz 1977:197). Furthermore, Ershad patronized nationwide formation of youth clubs to win support of young people. A statistic is worth noting here. The Social Welfare directorate of the Bangladesh Government had issued a record number of 68,576 registrations to various clubs and associations during his regime (1982-90), whereas only 12,712 licenses were issued in the preceding eight years (1977-81). After his ouster, the civilian governments issued only 11,174 registrations in the subsequent eight-year period (1993-2001).<sup>1</sup> Approximately 200,000 non-registered literary and cultural organizations have also been established during that period.<sup>2</sup>

In the early days of the military rule, these clubs provided Ershad with the ability to nip in the bud any possible threat of organized youth resistance against his illegal intervention into civil politics (Mohiuddin 1997). He also devised an innovative “pollution” principle—a strategy to pollute and destroy morality and political visions of the young people. For the first time in Bangladesh history, young people have had “easy” access to “easy” money, and arms and drugs. In 1983, he formed his own political party and its student front. Characteristics of his political party fit with what Gledhill termed an “official ruling party” (Gledhill 1994:11). Eventually, his “easy-money”

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<sup>1</sup> Literary and cultural organizations did not require registration.

<sup>2</sup> Primary information collected from the Directorate of Social Welfare by the author of this paper.

strategy pulled into his party a large segment of politicians from different opposition parties, resulting in fragmentation of opposition parties into small and powerless entities.

These factions served as his “official oppositions” (Gledhill 1994:11) in all vote-rigged civilian elections. Simultaneously, his student front had established a reign of “mafia” style crime and terrorism, and adapted various brutal means to suppress student organizations in colleges and universities of Bangladesh. Lacking ideological base, his student front collapsed in 1988—after seven years of his coup d’état. With a few exceptions, most members of his student league established networks with racketeers and crime syndicates and criminality-prone occupations. Many of them captured leadership in several occupational pressure groups in the mid eighties.

Mortoza (2004) writes about five known godfathers of present time who once turned from student leaders to leaders of Collective Bargaining Agents (CBAs), and trade unions of Banks and industries. There were three owner-cum editors of national newspapers who were alternatively known as godfathers and think-tanks of recent day Bangladesh underworld. Five well-known godfathers ran a number of charitable organizations, some of whom were known as “king-makers” for their overwhelming influence on national politics. Three NGOs located in crime-prone southwestern Bangladesh were blamed for their alleged involvement with the Sarbahara Party (Proletariat Party)—a notorious crime syndicate. Importantly, all of these recent-day mafias were involved in leadership positions of different trade unions and occupational pressure groups during the Ershad regime.

### **Analysis and Conclusion**

As per the above discussion, the notion of “civil society” of Bangladesh lacks precision, both definitively and conceptually. Reuben (2003) showed that contemporary civil society has become increasingly diverse and multifaceted due to diffraction of interests, migration and urbanization, and globalization. Roniger and Gunes-Ayata (1994:42), generalizing from the Third World context, and Barenstein (2000:14), specifying from the Bangladesh context, assert that state and civil society at the local level are often framed by (political) clientelism. In consideration of the attributive resemblance of civil societies of African countries with that of Bangladesh, a parallel is drawn here from Robert Fatton Jr. (1999). He believes that the civil society might not always remain civil, could indeed be quite uncivil, and replete with antinomies. He argued further that, in spite of this, the civil society “offers subordinate classes a fragile refuge from predatory rulers, but it was incapable of generating collective welfare and supplanting the state in the provision of public goods” (Fatton, Jr. 1999:2).

Development economists generally tend to overlook these shortcomings of the civil society, and thus propagate the idea that civil society must play a vital role in socio-economic development of the developing countries<sup>3</sup>. Drawing upon examples of success stories of grassroots peoples’

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<sup>3</sup> . Indeed, some grassroots NGOs and micro-enterprises all over the world are extending human development services to the marginalized segment of society, and increasingly gaining public currency.

cooperatives, development economists view the civil society as an essential force in establishing social equity and entitlement (Dreze and Sen. 1989), and market transparency (Stiglitz 1997), as well as deep democracy (Appadurai 2002) and good governance, and democratization of development dialogue—meaning giving the powerless people power, and the voiceless people voice through establishing their access to information and ensuring opinion in decision-making.

However, pro-people populist cooperatives constitute only a small segment of civil society initiatives. Reuben's (2003) evaluation study also asserts that civil societies operating with specific interests such as gender issues or micro-credit are exceptions, and that most civil societies of other types generally lack democracy, accountability, transparency and formal leadership norms. According to his opinion, most civil societies suffer from lack of clarity, and clear rules of engagement and accountability on the issue of representation of civil society organizations (Reuben 2003:5-6). He referred in his writing to the experience James Wolfensohn, former president of the World Bank, who during his tours to developing countries repeatedly faced the same question about the participation of NGOs in development advocacy: *Tell me. Who are those guys? To whom are they accountable?* Reuben (2003:5) quoted a statement of Mr. Ali Badjo Gamatie, Minister of Finance of Niger, in which he said in a press interview: *"You consult, but the government is in charge. The government makes the decision. That's what I wanted to make clear. Now, I know the NGO has a sexy appeal as civil society. You go in some of these countries; I don't know what civil society means. Before I got to this position, I knew what it was. Now, I don't know. Anybody who left office would create his NGO, and then, that's civil society. You know that."*

Indeed it is political power that makes a difference, even in the operation of social wellbeing of people. The popular understanding that the "civil society" means non-political and philanthropically motivated people or institutions reinforces an apparently mistaken idea that "political activism" is "uncivil". More importantly, it creates a weak and artificial division between "political mind" and "political activism". The civil society may be free of "political activism" par excellence, but it can be essentially engrossed by "political mind"—as Socrates termed human being as a political animal.

Thus, political activists hold decision-making power. Political activists are risk-takers, because taking risks yields possibilities of regaining ruling power, and authority and accomplishment of material benefits. In contrast, the civil society is generally composed of risk-avoiders because its very philanthropic principles stand in opposition to political visions that are pre-requisites of activist-type public resistance against militaristic oppressions and misrule. As well, the civil societies of Bangladesh have been undergoing tremendous pressures of globalization, consumption-fetishism and market expansion. As the very existence of the middle class members of civil societies depend on coping, and adjustment and negotiation, as well as immersion in the market forces, they seem to prefer compromise and alliance with evils of economic and political power structures to risking private interest for public good. Findings of Fatton Jr.'s study of African countries reaffirm this hypothesis. The researcher of that study writes: "embedded in the

coercive social discipline of the market, civil society was virtually bound to come to the defence and promotion of private rights and sectional claims” (Fatton, Jr. 1999:2).

Therefore, an overly generalized use of the notion of “civil society” may constitute an acute risk of misrepresentation of a potentially “anti-civil society” or “pseudo-civil society” as “civil society”. There remains another risk too. Unless applied sociologists establish a notion of a more selective use of the term, the “real” civil societies may not accomplish their objective of social well-being because of public skepticism and confusion in distinguishing civil society organizations and “civil society mafias”. Thus, Reuben (2003) suggests that civil societies be identified in terms of two principles: “do good” and “do not harm”. Nevertheless, there is a political sociological need to establish an operational discourse of the civil society towards understanding of distinctions between the “civil society” and “pseudo-civil society” or “civil society mafias”.



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