

Elite Development Discourses Under Authoritarianism: Neoliberalism, Political Control, and Social Inequality in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The paper critically analyzes the convergence of neoliberal development approaches with authoritarian rule in Bangladesh during Sheikh Hasina's tenure from 2009 to 2024. Despite significant economic growth in the country, the benefits of this progress have been unevenly distributed, favoring the political and economic elite, intensifying social inequities, and compromising democratic processes. This study employs elite theory and the concept of competitive authoritarianism to examine how development discourses, often presented as national development, have been utilized to legitimize authoritarian governance and suppress dissent. The study uses case studies, including the Padma Multipurpose Bridge and Rampal Power Plant, to demonstrate how large-scale infrastructure projects have favored elite interests at the expense of local needs and environmental sustainability. The analysis emphasizes that neoliberal policies, such as privatization and deregulation, have created a political environment in which economic growth consolidates authority, restricts citizen participation, and erodes democratic values. Based on secondary literature and newspaper content, this paper contextualizes Bangladesh's growth trajectory within the broader political dynamics of South Asia to clarify the role of elite-driven development in strengthening authoritarian governments, which is the paper's central argument. The paper argues that unless development priorities are changed to prioritize inclusion, environmental sustainability, and democratic accountability, Bangladesh's economic growth will be nothing more than a veneer covering up inequalities and political repression.

Keywords: Development discourse, elite, social inequality, citizen participation.

INTRODUCTION

Development discourses in Bangladesh have historically shaped public narratives and guided economic policies, often at the expense of grassroots democratic goals. However, during Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian rule from 2009 to 2024, these discourses have taken on a distinct character, increasingly influenced by elite interests and a neoliberal agenda, and served as instruments of political repression and control. This era signifies a notable transformation in which economic development is viewed not only as a national goal but also as a means of reinforcing political authority. The ruling class has effectively suppressed dissent, marginalized institutional autonomy, and legitimized authoritarian strategies by deliberately using development rhetoric as a façade for economic success.

This study critically analyses the role of elite-driven development narratives in Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina's leadership as mechanisms of political control and economic inequalities. It contends that the discourse on development, while advocating for international trade and infrastructure advancement, has predominantly neglected democratic ideals and marginalized local demands. In line with the Washington Consensus's neoliberal framework, the government has frequently prioritized economic expansion and privatization at the price of inclusive governance and social justice (Hossain, 2017; Van Schendel, 2009).

The adoption of economic development narratives in authoritarian regimes is not unique to Bangladesh; rather, it is a global political trend. Scholars contend that to maintain political legitimacy and erode democratic processes, authoritarian leaders commonly appropriate the language of progress. This trend is notably apparent in Bangladesh, where the deliberate alignment of development plans with elite interests reinforces the ruling party's dominance over public and commercial institutions. The emergence of competitive authoritarianism has blurred the distinction between democratic aspirations and authoritarian rule, creating a political environment in which economic development discourses often eclipse democratic principles.

This study aims to strengthen the existing literature on authoritarianism, development, and elite theory through a comprehensive case study of Bangladesh. It emphasizes the essential need to critically examine the narratives of economic growth that prioritize elite interests over the broader public good. Such an approach enables the readers, notably in countries dealing with both economic inequities and democratic backsliding, to address the present situation and advocate for more equitable development strategies. It addressed the adverse impacts of elite-driven policies on Bangladesh's democratic processes, raising concerns about the country's democratic state. It analyses these trends within the overarching framework of South Asian development politics, in which analogous patterns of political control through economic agendas have emerged in nations such as India and Pakistan (Chowdhury, 2015; Lorch, 2021).

Methodology

This study employed a secondary literature review as its primary method. It drew on historical records, newspaper articles, and scholarly literature to examine the intersection of neoliberalism, elite power, and authoritarianism in Bangladesh's developmental trajectory. We reviewed policy documents, such as laws and regulations; public discourse, including transcripts of public speeches and press releases; and mainstream media coverage of the Sheikh Hasina regime. We considered a document titled "White Paper 2024: State of the Bangladesh economy: Dissection of a Development Narrative" published by Citizens' Platform for SDGs under the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in 2025. This helped to take into account how neoliberal interventions were framed, constructed, communicated, and legitimized as necessary for development in Bangladesh.

Review of Literature

The review of literature situates the study of elite-driven development discourses within Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian administration by examining current knowledge and theories. The section is segmented into four sections: (1) Historical Approaches to Development, (2) Neoliberal Development and Authoritarianism, (3) Elite Theory and Development in Bangladesh, and (4) Development and Political Control in South Asia.

Historical Perspectives on Development in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's development trajectory is profoundly shaped by its colonial history and the socio-political instability that followed independence. Before colonialism, Bengal was a wealthy economic center where communities engaged in agriculture and artisanal crafts, supporting local economies and social structures (Tharoor, 2018). British colonial governance disrupted this equilibrium, transforming the region into a supplier of raw materials for global markets and undermining local businesses and livelihoods (Mondal, 2014).

Following its independence, Bangladesh struggled to rebuild its economy amid pervasive poverty and political turmoil. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's administration emphasized state-driven growth through nationalization; however, financial constraints and unstable governance hindered these initiatives. Subsequent leaders, such as Ziaur Rahman and Ershad, turned toward market-oriented strategies, focusing on privatization and rural development. In recent decades, governments such as those of Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina have adopted neoliberal models, emphasizing trade liberalization, foreign investment, and extensive infrastructure initiatives (Van Schendel, 2009; Hossain, 2017).

The fact that elite interests have mainly shaped development is apparent despite various approaches. This elite-centric emphasis often marginalizes grassroots involvement and perpetuates inequalities, raising

essential questions about who genuinely benefits from such initiatives. Highlighting this makes the audience aware of the power dynamics in Bangladesh's development, fostering a deeper understanding of the issues (Quadir, 2000).

Neoliberal Development and Authoritarianism

Neoliberal development approaches, characterized by policies of privatization and trade liberalization, are often portrayed as pathways to economic growth. However, these strategies can also serve to reinforce authoritarian control. Worldwide, governments have employed the rhetoric of development to validate centralized authority, suppress opposition, and undermine democratic processes (Escobar, 1995). Under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina during the present era of Bangladesh, neoliberal development policies became priorities, despite significant democratic backsliding, which led to her government being perceived as authoritarian (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Sheikh Hasina's leadership in Bangladesh exemplifies this dynamic. Her administration has promoted digitization and massive infrastructure projects as indicators of development, primarily relying on neoliberal principles. Although these initiatives have stimulated economic expansion, they have concurrently exacerbated social inequities and marginalized at-risk groups (Khan, 2013). Scholars argue that such measures disproportionately benefit the wealthy, while offering ordinary citizens fewer opportunities for gain (Riaz, 2021). This is consistent with worldwide trends, in which neoliberalism promotes elite domination while marginalizing more inclusive and alternative approaches to development.

Elite Theory and Development in Bangladesh

To understand development in Bangladesh, one needs to look at the role of elites, political leaders, bureaucrats, and corporate individuals who have always used policies for their own interests. The elite theory posits that those in power manipulate resources and narratives to maintain their domination, often at the expense of broader societal welfare (Ahasan and Gardner, 2016).

From investments in the energy sector to infrastructure projects such as the Padma Multipurpose Bridge, elite capture has taken many forms in Bangladesh. These projects are typically praised as symbols of development but are often characterized by inefficiency, corruption, and the marginalization of local communities in decision-making (Rahman, 2021). Public institutions have also been managed to serve elite interests at the expense of democratic accountability and participation (Lorch, 2021).

Development and Political Control in South Asia

The use of development to impose political control is not unique to Bangladesh; it is a common trend throughout South Asia. Leaders in nations such as India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have similarly utilized development narratives to legitimize their governance and suppress opposition. Populist leaders in India have undertaken numerous initiatives to project an image of development, often at the expense of democratic ideals (Chowdhury, 2015).

In Bangladesh, the discourse of progress has become a fundamental element of Sheikh Hasina's political approach. Her government has attempted to mitigate allegations of authoritarian inclinations by emphasizing economic success stories. This aligns with broader regional patterns in which economic growth takes priority over the welfare of marginalized communities, highlighting the complex connection between development and governance (Ahmed, 2024).

The literature depicts progress in Bangladesh. Although achievements are evident in many domains, elite interests significantly influence the process and often prioritize expansion over equity and inclusivity. This elite-centric approach exemplifies a broader worldwide trend in which neoliberalism facilitates authoritarian governance.

This study situates Bangladesh within its historical and regional context to better understand how development discourses have evolved under Sheikh Hasina's leadership. It will examine the ramifications of this trend

democracy, equality, and social inclusion within the country.

Analysis

Neoliberal Influence and Elite-Centric Development Discourses

Sheikh Hasina's administration established Bangladesh's development strategy within a neoliberal framework, prioritizing rapid economic growth and integration into the global market. This approach often aligns with the tenets of the Washington Consensus, which advocates for privatization, deregulation, and spending cuts. Although these policies have led to notable GDP growth and substantial infrastructure development, they have disproportionately favored the political and economic elite. Khan (2013) and Panday (2023) argue that this growth model exacerbates social disparities, with advantages accruing to a privileged minority, while the majority, particularly marginalized populations, are overlooked.

Examples such as the Padma Bridge and the Rampal Power Plant demonstrate how elite-driven development initiatives serve the interests of business and politics. Despite being a significant infrastructural achievement, the Padma Bridge has faced criticism for its excessive expenses and the absence of tangible benefits for residents along its route (Dhaka Tribune, 12 Sep. 2024). The Rampal Power Plant, situated adjacent to the Sundarbans mangrove forest, has faced criticism for its potential environmental impacts and the possible displacement of local communities. These projects are often depicted as emblems of national development; however, their execution raises questions about inclusion and long-term sustainability.

Following the overthrow of the government of Sheikh Hasina by a student movement during the July-August 2024 period, the Interim Government of Bangladesh formed a committee to publish a list of the most corrupt projects implemented during her regime. After a three-month investigation, the White Paper committee published a report indicating that \$16 billion was siphoned off yearly during the Hasina regime, totaling \$234 billion from 2009 to 2024 (Travelli and Walid, 2024).

Moreover, neoliberal policies, including land privatization, export-oriented manufacturing, and deregulated labor markets, have created significant barriers to upward mobility for vulnerable people. The quest for export-driven expansion has led to exploitative labor practices, particularly in the garment industry, where low wages and poor working conditions persist. These regulations, although they attract foreign investment, limit marginalized people's access to resources and opportunities, thereby perpetuating existing hierarchies.

The convergence of these neoliberal policies with authoritarian administration exacerbates the situation. The government has restricted citizen participation and accountability by centralizing decision-making authority within a small political elite. The centralization of power not only constrains democratic processes but also perpetuates inequality by prioritizing economic efficiency over social equity.

Politicization of Public and Private Institutions

A notable component of Bangladesh's developmental narrative under Sheikh Hasina is the systematic politicization of public and commercial organizations to advance the ruling regime's goals. This trend has compromised institutional autonomy, diminished public trust, and fostered an environment where allegiance to the government supersedes talent and ability. Mostofa and Subedi (2021) note that public institutions, including universities, the judiciary, and law enforcement organizations, have been co-opted to suit the ruling party's objectives.

For instance, educational institutions that should nurture critical thinking and creativity are increasingly vulnerable to political interference, with appointments and promotions generally based on party allegiance rather than competence. This politics permeates government procurement and project execution, as contracts are often awarded to firms with political affiliations. Campbell (2023) emphasizes that private-sector partnerships are predominantly controlled by companies associated with the ruling regime, inhibiting equitable competition and privileging oligarchic interests.

Newspaper articles and investigative journalism have shed light on numerous well-known instances of

institutional politicization. The lack of transparency in awarding infrastructure project contracts has raised concerns about corruption and inefficiency. These actions divert resources from vital services and cultivate a culture of impunity by undermining accountability measures to shield those in authority.

Neglect of Local Aspirations and Violations of Human Rights

Bangladesh's rapid economic growth often compromises fundamental human rights and the well-being of local populations. Development projects are often carried out without sufficient consultation or adequate compensation for affected individuals. This marginalization exemplifies a hierarchical approach to development that prioritizes national status and elite interests over local needs and aspirations.

Rahman (2021) and Ahmed (2024) provide crucial insights into the displacement caused by big infrastructure projects. The establishment of industrial zones and power plants has resulted in the forced displacement of indigenous and rural populations, damaging their livelihoods and cultural customs. Notwithstanding promises of compensation and rehabilitation, numerous displaced households remain in unsafe conditions, with restricted access to resources or alternative income sources.

Human rights abuses are also apparent in the labor practices linked to Bangladesh's export-driven sectors. The garment sector, a cornerstone of the country's economy, has faced significant criticism for dangerous working conditions, suppression of labor organizations, and inadequate wages. Reports from NGOs highlight instances in which workers were denied their right to organize, while industrial owners exploited their political affiliations to evade accountability. These abuses display the authoritarian foundation for Bangladesh's development plans, where economic growth is emphasized over the preservation of individual rights and communal welfare.

The environmental implications of development initiatives have been a considerable issue. Initiatives such as the Rampal Power Plant, located adjacent to the Sundarbans, have faced criticism for their environmental repercussions and for disregarding the perspectives of local stakeholders (The Daily Star, 2016). This marginalization exemplifies a broader trend in which the government's pursuit of rapid industrialization and foreign investment overlooks grassroots groups advocating for environmental and social justice.

CONCLUSION

An elite-centric, neoliberal approach that prioritizes economic growth at the price of democratic inclusion and social equity has been the defining characteristic of Bangladesh's development trajectory since Sheikh Hasina took over as Prime Minister. Although this approach has exacerbated social inequalities, compromised institutional integrity, and eroded fundamental rights, it has yielded substantial economic benefits. The authoritarian governance paradigm connected with this development narrative is responsible for consolidating control among a small group of political elites.

This narrative illustrates how economic growth in developing nations can facilitate political consolidation, sometimes at the expense of marginalized communities. Future comparative studies may study how other South Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India, handle similar tensions between top-down growth and grassroots resistance. This study has the potential to offer substantial insights into alternative development strategies that can harmonize economic progress, inclusion, equity, and sustainability.

The development narrative of Bangladesh during Sheikh Hasina's rule displays a notable paradox. The nation has attained significant economic accomplishments, garnering international acclaim for its development. This achievement, however, has been accompanied by increasing inequality, environmental degradation, and the erosion of democratic norms. The discourse of development, often portrayed as a marker of national pride, has increasingly reinforced elite authority and suppressed dissenting perspectives.

This analysis highlights the risks associated with prioritizing growth over inclusion and democratic accountability. Policies based on the Washington Consensus principles have facilitated rapid economic growth while reinforcing an elite-centric agenda that marginalizes grassroots involvement and local needs. The

development narrative has influenced the country's destiny and changed governance, converting it into a mechanism for exerting control rather than promoting shared prosperity.

As Bangladesh plots its future, a pivotal question arises: Can the nation harmonize its ambitions for economic growth with the imperatives of social justice and democratic revitalization? Resolving this disparity necessitates shifting priorities—from catering to the interests of a select elite to guarantee that the benefits of progress are distributed relatively equally across all segments of society. Without such a transition, the prospect of growth may amount to a superficial achievement, masking the profound obstacles that threaten the fundamental basis of sustainable and inclusive development.

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