

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BANGLADESH, PANEL 47

The panel focusing on Bangladesh

at the European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, 27-30 June 2006, Leiden, The Netherlands co-organised by the Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS, University of Leiden) and the European Association for South Asian Studies (EASAS).

Convenors:

Dr Willem van der Geest (EIAS, Brussels), Prof Mobasser Monem (University of Dhaka, Bangladesh) and Prof Golam Hosain (Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Bangladesh).

In his brief introduction of the Panel, Dr Willem van der Geest explained that this panel seeks to ensure that the Conference maintains an explicit platform for research and analysis of Bangladesh. Its focus was on issues of the quality of political governance and the resulting outcomes on social development and the nature of complex interdependencies and feedback between governance and development.

Prof Arild Engelsen Ruud of the University of Oslo, Norway presented his draft paper on *Student Politics in Bangladesh*. The paper analyses a number of recent trends in student politics, seeking to identify factors which drive 'muscle' politics characterising life in Dhaka's student halls of residence today. Student politics is vertically linked with teacher politics, all the way up to the office of the Vice-chancellor. The student activists hardly deserve the name: they are not really studying, but rather pursuing activities of *mastans* (muscle men). Clever leaders manipulate and use these *mastans* for extortionist practices, increasingly pervading University life and financial allocations. The process of *tadbir* (networking) is crucially important. However, the real *mastans* never move far in politics.

The discussion observed that to understand the transformation of the nature of students politics into its present violent character would require a framework incorporating the concepts of (i) the post-colonial state; (ii) client-patrons frameworks; (iii) rentseeking and extortion; (iv) the nature of loyalty structures vis-à-vis leadership.

Ms Shammi Akhter, University of Jahangirnagar, Savar, Bangladesh, presented her paper on the *Participation of Women in Urban Local Governance in Bangladesh*. Rapid urbanisation has meant that structures of governance have changed. New rules specify that women should actively participate in the governance structures, with the overall objective of ensuring that gender representation is unbiased. However, the case study of Savar Pourashava indicate that this objective is not really achieved. Still the Chairman tends to continue to hold supreme powers and most committees, especially those spending money, remain male-controlled. To achieve better representation would require intensive capacity-building to assist the women representatives.

The discussion observed that depth of urban governance problem was so severe (land grabbing, unemployment, uncontrollable migration, under-funding of administration) that a more comprehensive approach to addressing these problems was required.

Dr Joe Devine, University of Bath, United Kingdom, presented on *The Construction of Well-being in Bangladesh: A micro-political analysis* - a research study combining conceptual and empirical analysis of 'well-being' in developing countries in a comparative way – including Thailand, Ethiopia and Bangladesh. The Bourdieu notion of 'habitus' as well as the literature on the economics of happiness provide conceptual starting points. Wellbeing is more than the absence of poverty, it also depends on the generation of meaning within social structures, as well as the cultural patterns in which these meanings and aspirations are achieved. Appadurai's 2004 analysis of the 'higher order' normative context, the intermediate processes, as well as the material level of the inventory of wants provides further concepts for analysis.

Empirical research in six different sites within Bangladesh examines the collective action programme of rice distribution at subsidised prices at the Thana level – (Sholpomulle Khaddo Sorboraho Prokolpo) reaching some 100 vulnerable households per Thana. The research identifies the processes of ascribing entitlements to particular households and notes the increased importance of the presence of the two main political parties now in nearly every village. No allocations are possible outside of the tightly controlled party framework. Hence, the strategies to achieve well-being must confirm to the informal logic of actual life. Party affiliation has become a key component of defining fairness—no allocation will be made outside of the purview of the Union secretary. The political discourse of 'fairness' in distribution implies a veiled threat that any shift of political loyalty might mean a loss of entitlement.

Prof Mobasser Monem, Department of Public Administration, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh presented on the subject of *E-government in Bangladesh: Rhetoric and Realities*. E-government had received increased financial allocations from donors with the stated intention of helping to fight corruption and to improve efficiency of government-to-civil society contacts, as well as between government and business.

However, the reality of linking up Bangladesh to the information super-highway through a sub-marine cable had been delayed and slow and other major obstacles were low tele-density and limited internet connectivity. In effect digital divide was increasing – despite public announcements. Skills-enhancement outside of government was improving more rapidly, but not anywhere near as fast as within competing countries.

Reviewing and discussing the proceedings of the Panel, the convenors and paper presenters decided that the panel should be proposed for the 20th Conference under the general name of Political Governance and Economic Change in Bangladesh. Publication of the panel papers on the EASAS website as well as through appropriate journals or as an edited volume should be actively pursued.

Dr Willem van der Geest, LEIDEN, 30th of June, 2006.