

## Concern over governance

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The country is rated very poorly when most of the global indicators of political and economic governance are considered, economist Wahiduddin Mahmud said yesterday.

“The implementation of the welfare policies and programmes in Bangladesh, however, has to contend with a serious problem of governance dysfunction,” he told an international conference at a city hotel.

BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), in association with Effective States and Inclusive Development (EISD), International Growth Centre and Think Tank Initiative, organised the three-day international conference on the political economy, accountability and governance.

Mashiur Rahman, adviser for economic affairs to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Brian Allemekinders, Deputy Director at the Canadian High Commission, Bangladesh, academics, economists and representatives of civil society organisations took part in the conference.

Mahmud said though there was transition from authoritarian rule to parliamentary democracy in 1991, the political culture is one that does not allow democratic practices to flourish. “Or one that can hardly deliver an accountable and transparent state. The core governance system is characterised by a dysfunctional, highly conformational politics and absence of democratic practices within the major political parties,” he noted.

Apart from these, the economist said politicisation of the state institutions, a corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy, and a widespread culture of patronage politics, in which spoils and privileges are parcelled out to different clientele groups, were essential tools of political management in Bangladesh.

“The consequences of this extremely weak governance structure and non-existent accountability mechanism are most acute in the spheres of public provisioning of services, as evidenced in the abysmal quality of ‘free services’, abuse of authority in the form of bribes and illegal fees, leakages of resources, patronage culture in distribution of resources, and so on,” he said. He said the national elections, held under the system of a caretaker government since the transition to parliamentary democracy, were seen as fair and credible.

“People seemed to have demonstrated a willingness to move against regimes once they crossed some vaguely defined threshold with respect to poor governance and corruption, as evidenced by the fall of successive governments led by the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party,” he said.

Mahmud said this created an incentive structure in which public representatives tried to respond to the genuine popular sentiments to obtain re-election while still engaging in rent-seeking activities.

The economist observed that also at work, apparently, is a non-institutional mechanism for ensuring public accountability, such as through civic activism, a lively media, and widespread political awareness among the people at large. "This may have compensated to an extent the absence of effective oversight functions of Parliament," he asserted.

Mashiur Rahman, economic affairs adviser to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, said the influence that politics has on economic decisions, or the political economics of the government, affect the economy. "Accountability has expanded, but the accountability route lies through professional rules. Any kind of criticism should be sustained by specified professional rules and standards," he said.

He said the media is a platform between the public and government policies; people can judge the nature of the government through it.

"But the media outlets owned by private organisations deliver stories that cater to public excitement. For anyone who participates in public politics, a sense of responsibility restricts him or her, but a scholar has freedom to express himself or herself," Mashiur Rahman further said.

Brian Allemekinders, Deputy Director at the Canadian High Commission, Bangladesh, said the traffic snarls in Dhaka reflect the state of governance in Bangladesh. "Bangladesh has strong laws, but enforcement should be improved. There is sharp contrast between economic and social development," he observed.

Allemekinders said the country needs to ensure good governance for attaining the medium-term development goals, set by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, by 2021. "People of Bangladesh are very politically conscious, but they have to face conflicts in politics. To move forward, Bangladesh must avoid confrontational politics," he added.

Allemekinders added that though governance and corruption are still great challenges for Bangladesh, the country has, by and large, made significant progress