

Dysfunctional governance remains serious problem

Democratic practices not being allowed to flourish: Prof Wahiduddin

FE Report

Bangladesh has the image of a developmental welfare state, as reflected in the country's Constitution and in numerous other official documents, but the country has to contend with a serious problem of dysfunctional governance, former caretaker government adviser Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud has said.

The country is rated very poorly according to most global indicators of political and economic governance, said the economist while addressing a session of the international conference on 'Political Economy, Accountability and Governance' at a local hotel on Thursday.

The Brac Institute of Governance and Development of the BRAC University is organising the three-day international conference in partnership with the Think-Tank Initiative (TTI), the International Growth Centre (IGC), the LSE and the Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID).

According to Mr Mahmud, although there was a transition from an 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 governance.

"The core government system is characterised by a dysfunctional parliament, highly confrontational politics, absence of democratic practices within the major parties, polarisation of the state institutions and a corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy," said Mr Mahmud.

Consequences of this extremely weak governance structure and non-existent accountability mechanism are most acute in the spheres of public provisioning of services, he added.

Acting Canadian High Commissioner Brian Allemekinders, who attended the programme as a special guest, also identified governance and corruption as two great challenges for the country's development.

"Bangladesh has very good laws, but their enforcement needs to be improved. There is a strong contrast between Bangladesh's economic and social development successes and the challenges," said the diplomat.

Despite all these governance dysfunction, Mr Mahmud said, paradoxically the state appears to deliver on many of the welfare promises which included, among others, remarkable achievements in human development indicators and reduction in poverty level during the last two decades.

These achievements are now sometimes termed as Bangladesh 'Development Surprise' said Mr Mahmud adding, "We explain this paradox in respect of the effectiveness of welfare-oriented policies like ensuring food security and provisioning of public services and social protections."

In spite of achievements in many welfare indicators, Bangladesh, he said, performs poorly in basic civic and human rights.

The inaugural session was addressed, among others, by Economic Affairs Adviser to the Prime Minister Dr Mashiur Rahman, Julia Brunt of ESID, Syed Saad Andaleeb of Brac University and Sultan Hafeez Rahman of the Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD).

Prof Rehman Sobhan presided over the main session where Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud and Mr Kunal Sen of ESID presented key-note papers on 'Bangladesh: The Limits of a Developmental Welfare State under Governance Dysfunction' and 'Governance and Development Outcomes in Asia' respectively.

Mushtaq Khan of SOAS, University of London, Shankar P Sharma of NPC and some other distinguished economists took part in the discussion on the papers.

Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud in his paper tried to explain the paradox in terms of nature of development interventions and the underlying political incentives and accountability mechanism.

"The free media and civic activism at the national level, though not at grassroots level, are a partial substitute of formal institutional accountability, said Mr Mahmud.

The Acting Canadian High Commissioner also recognised the successes the country achieved. "It is important to recognise these successes and address the challenges that continue to hold Bangladesh back," said the diplomat.

According to Mr Allemekinders, Bangladeshis as a people are very politically conscious and astute and are in an environment where politics are alarmingly confrontational.

"For Bangladesh to move forward, confrontational politics must diminish. The trend of politicising institutions must decrease. For this to happen, citizens will have to ask for it and demand it and hold your government and political parties accountable," he added.

Regarding the last election, he observed that Canada was disappointed as more than half of the parliamentary seats were not contested, but instead were filled through acclamation.

He, however, said democracy is about much more than elections. Democracy requires strong independent institutions, including the judiciary and the Election Commission. It requires space for media, and civil society to be able to constructively criticise the government and institutions accountable to build a state that is inclusive and rules-based.