

Oligarchy as a constraint to development

M. Azizur Rahman

"Oligarch" is a member of a small group of people, who run a country or organization. Such a system of running the country by a small group of people is called "oligarchic". Eventually, through forming the societal oligarchy bureaucracy takes over from democracy. In the business world, when the control of all or most of the business activity is conducted by a few companies is called oligopoly. Businessmen form an oligopoly to protect them from the competition with other business or company. When social or political administration lies with a few group of people is called societal or political oligarchy.

The oligarchy can be a small and an independent group or a mix of more than one group of people or companies. Normally politicians, civil bureaucrats, military force or the other kind of social elite can form the oligarchy either independently or in a mixed fashion. However, power including muscle power, political-, economic-, business-, social and bureaucratic power independently or jointly serve as a source of forming an oligarchy. In reality, politician alone is not enough or they take help from the civil bureaucrats or from the military force in their effort to form an oligarchy. In some countries including Bangladesh, politicians try to collude with military force, police force and even the judiciary system to form an oligarchy in a relatively more comprehensive manner. In the democratic world, the Government should listen to people and work for people.

According to Abraham Lincoln, the then president of USA. "Democracy is the Government of the people, by the people, for the people." People expect a lot of things from the Government as these are committed by the party-in-power before election. But this two-way communication and the equilibrium between public demand and the Government's contribution gets interrupted if there exist an illegitimate oligarchy in the society. In most of the developing countries, the civil bureaucrats are both open and hidden oligarchy.

They are the intermediary group of people who take advantage from the common people and also from their

political supervisors. Civil bureaucrats also try to satisfy their political people or people-in-power in their effort to obtain their own interest and self-interest in particular.

The managerial skill of the civil bureaucrats is important and essential to run the country. Support of military force is unavoidable to maintain the sovereignty of a country. Sometimes support of military force becomes necessary if some civilian group of people would like to forcefully acquire the government power.

So, in some unusual situation the civil-military bureaucrats can form a "marriage of convenience" to bring the administrative stability temporally. This is called civil-military oligarch. It is interesting to note that bureaucrats strive to survive the political dominance by adopting various tactics. Bureaucrats become loyal to the ruling politicians during their service period and form a kind of oligarch. After retirement bureaucrats join the politician with some purpose of forming a societal oligarch.

Once again, bureaucrats are well qualified and smart. The political party in power needs the bureaucratic support to run the government. The opposition also needs the support of bureaucrats to protest the government while they are not in power or they are in opposition. That way a societal marriage of oligarchy takes place between the politician and bureaucrats.

In any society or in a developing or developed World there can be a different kind of lobbying groups such as, tax payers, industrialist, labor or trade union, economic and non-economic and social elites etc. Among the industrialist there exist a few strong and powerful association. Examples of such association are many in Bangladesh including Federal Bureau of Chamber of Commerce and Industries (FBCCI), Bangladesh Garments Manufacturing & Export Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Textile Mills and Export Association (BTMEA) and different other chamber of commerce or business. One or more or a couple of this lobbying group can independently or jointly convince the Government or the politi-

cian in power to change some policy in part or significantly in their own favour. And the group of bureaucrats can fairly serve as an agent between the government or the politician in power. Bureaucrats also do serve as the negotiator between the lobbying group and the government. In this process of negotiation, the bureaucrats takes the opportunity to exchange the favor between the lobbying group and themselves.

In the system of providing services of negotiator, the bureaucrats can form a joint oligarchy either with the lobbying group or with the politician in power. In all cases of forming oligarchy, a certain group of people is benefited. The beneficiaries can be a group of people from some lobbying group or some politicians or the bureaucrats itself either separately or jointly.

Due to the formation of societal oligarchy, common people get neglected from their due benefits. Democratic government has the responsibility to listen and work for the people as mentioned before. Due to the existence of undesired oligarchy, the effort by the government may be significantly influenced by a group of people, whose interest may be different from the common people. Also, the common people may not get the significant part of the social benefit from the Government as committed before the election because of the oligarchic intervention.

Finally, oligarchy or a formation of undesired social group is not conducive to the society in its efforts to maximize the total social benefit or to minimize the social costs by an efficient allocation of social resource. Precisely speaking, any kind of societal oligarchy formed either by bureaucrat themselves or by a collusion between the bureaucrat or the politician in power or between bureaucrats and the lobbying group serve as a major or a significant constraint to development and improve the Human Development Index (HDI).

(Prof. Dr. M. Azizur Rahman is Vice-Chancellor, Uttara University, Email: d.arahmanuu@gmail.com)