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Imagine a situation in which the decision making community in the United States had virtually no direct information about Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi-Arabia, and all the Gulf States. Instead, their general position was one that simply stipulated that stability in that region needs to be insured, democracy needs to be promoted, and radicalism needs to be checked.

Imagine if, to understand

- what exactly goes on in Egypt and the potential brewing of a radical movement,
- or what effectively is going on in Lebanon and the emergence of a state within a state there,
- or what is even happening in Saudi Arabia in terms of education and curricula that prepare the way for more potential radicalization,

the Washingtonians prefer to rely on third hand knowledge. This would be absurd, short-sighted, even reckless.

Unfortunately, this is exactly the Washington DC attitude towards Bangladesh, a country whose population, potential, and stakes is equal to all the above mentioned countries.

There is an urgent need to consider Bangladesh on its own, for what it is, not as a battlefield between India and Pakistan, not as the ignored younger sibling

in South Asia, and not as the poverty stricken, hunger afflicted subject matter of yesteryear. Bangladesh is to be viewed as a serious model of possible success, and alas—possible failure.

- I. How can the state of affairs, one that short-changes Bangladesh, but also impairs the US ability to be a serious influence on the region, change?**
- II. Who are the stakeholders and what have they done towards this change, or why haven't they done enough to realize it?**
- III. Is there a role for a US policy specifically designed for Bangladesh, in Bangladeshi political life? Or would such a policy negatively impact Bangladesh political life?**

No one can claim to have the final answers to these questions. However, elements for a substantive answer are plenty. Here, I will overview them while providing a brief assessment of their implications.

First: How can the current state of affairs, one that short-changes Bangladesh, but also impairs the US ability to be a serious influence on the region, change?

In order to answer this fundamental question, we need to understand the reasons why the state of affairs exists. Briefly stated, it is the youth of Bangladesh, a nation just over thirty years of age, but also the youth of our democracy. Added to that, one has to admit, a certain parochialism in Bangladeshi politics that has limited not only our exposure to the US, but also to much of the world. We can note progress in this regard, both with the Bangladeshi involvement in the United Nations, and in other international

organizations such as SAARC and the OIC. Our British colonial past might orient us towards a Euro-centric or even London-centric approach. However, with the rest of the world, Bangladesh must realize that Washington is the focal point in the post-Cold War, unipolar arrangement.

We can identify three sources for change towards a correction of the **“Bangladesh-Ignored Syndrome”**.

The **first** is a growing Bangladeshi diaspora consisting both of blue-collared workers who, with their families constitute a considerable political base, and more recently, Bangladeshi professionals who are increasingly leaving their mark on life in their new homelands, including the United States. The American Bangladeshi community can no longer afford to be neglectful of developments in the old country and is accordingly agitating for a reconsideration of the absence of Bangladesh from the American policy-making process.

The **second** player pushing for change is the emerging global civil-society and the NGO-movement that recognizes the substantive value of civil organizations in Bangladesh. The recent award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Mohammad Yunus is the most visible example, but not the only one of this recognition. The global civil society movement has been at the forefront of the modest efforts of sensitizing Washington to developments in Bangladesh.

The **third** source of change, a more recent one, a tactical one, but not necessarily a minor one, is the policy analysis community, think tanks in Washington DC that are increasingly aware of the potential links between

groups in Bangladesh and the international radicals that are usually their subject of interest.

In sum, these three sources promise a change in Bangladesh awareness in the US capital. However, their compounded action must be supplemented by a **deliberate effort** on the part of other stake holders. Therefore, while change may be happening in Washington, it is not forceful enough.

The Second Question: Who are the stakeholders and what have they done towards the change bringing about in Bangladeshi awareness, or why haven't they done enough to realize it?

Absent from the above-mentioned list of stakeholders: the Bangladeshi Diaspora, the global civil society movement and the policy analysis community, are the three main objective stakeholders in what affects Bangladesh itself between Washington and Dhaka: the Bangladeshi political class, the US administration and the business communities in both places.

Some movement from within certain factions of the Bangladeshi-political class can be noted. However, the Bangladesh political class remains **largely consumed with its internal disputes and has yet to devote the needed attention for the tremendous impact that Washington can have** on the country. In other words, while there has been some action at the grass-roots, the main stakeholders are yet to act on the **importance** of the issue that there **needs to be a comprehensive US policy towards Bangladesh.**

The Third Question: Is there a role for a US policy specifically designed for Bangladesh, in Bangladeshi political life? Or would such a policy negatively impact Bangladesh political life?

Having noted the fact that both the Bangladeshi political class, and the US administration have not been active towards the formulation of a US policy on Bangladesh, we should wonder whether this is an **omission** on their part, or whether it is a **deliberate action**. For example, after the US administration recalled its Ambassador, Harry Thomas from Bangladesh, there was no one in the position of Ambassador in Bangladesh for close to six months. I would argue that, this is a result of bureaucratic sluggishness and of old habits that die hard, rather than a conscious policy based on rational calculation of needs. Absolutely, some would benefit from the status quo.

In other words, some, probably many, in Bangladesh would **rather not** have further American attention to what happens in the country. Those typically, are not in favor of any kind of international attention and would resort to nationalism or patriotism to fend it away. Unfortunately, the real motivation behind such exclusions is a desire to let corrupt or unjust state of affairs continues to their advantage.

Conclusion: US scrutiny, as well as **any** international attention should be welcome because we all recognize that Bangladesh, with all its potential, is still afflicted with a major case of corruption and mismanagement.

What Bangladesh gains from a comprehensive US policy towards it, is more transparency at home. What the US gains is, ensuring that international

radicalism does not secure a foothold in our precarious democracy. **It is a win-win situation.**