Democracy: An Ultimate Remedy towards the Flawed Urbanization in Bangladesh and China

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Abstract

This article examines recent decades of urbanization in Bangladesh and China. It comes to the conclusion that some of the basic needs of these countries' urban people have been ignored. By applying ethical reasoning, it proposes the idea that strengthening democratic processes would remedy the flawed urbanization process Bangladesh and China have gone through. However, the authorities in both countries constitute the biggest barrier toward strengthening democratic processes.

I.   Introduction

Urbanization constitutes a big part of any development plan. Instead of improving rural people's life, urbanization implies the movement of people to cities where development is typically happening at a faster pace. Bangladesh and China are two countries that have been undergoing rapid urbanization. Both countries have made significant progress with improving the living standards of their people. However, as this article shows, the living standards of some parts of the urban population have been overlooked during this urbanization and development process. If urbanization does not benefit the well-being of all people, we need to rethink the current urbanization process. More specifically, this article suggests that in the long run, improving democracy is the best way to protect the rights of the people.

This article examines the urbanization process of Bangladesh and China and proposes some steps to tackle the flaws of the current urbanization process. Following this introductory section, Section II reviews some literature related to the contexts, policies, and problems of urbanization in Bangladesh and China. Section III provides some socioeconomic background for these two countries. Section IV examines some key facts related to the urbanization process in both countries. Section V analyzes some ethical aspects by reviewing and discussing some scholarly ethical perspectives, which suggest that it is essential to meet the basic needs of everybody. Section VI provides some conclusions.

II.   Literature Review

Regarding the emergence of urbanization in Bangladesh and China, there is a wide variety of publications, including a large academic literature as well as many news stories and commentaries.

Especially for China, there is a large literature examining the side effects or by-products of the urbanization and development process. In response to the clearance of the so-called "low-end population" in Beijing, Ma (2017) criticizes the ignorance towards the rights of the "low-end" urban population, while Miller (2012) analyzes China's outdated citizenship system and the necessity to modify it. Mahmud & Sawada (2017) point out the flaws of urbanization based on how urbanization affected the subjective well-being of the people in Bangladesh, while Huq (2016) summarizes a set of proposed solutions towards the rapid urbanization in Bangladesh.

- Ma (2017) reviews the recent history of China's rapid urbanization and criticized the objectification perspective during this process. She pointed out that even many years after 2008, which was the first year that more than half of the global population lived in urban areas, China had not improved its outdated citizenship policy. By prolonging the policy, it cultivated the basis of discrimination and inequality. Schooling, for example, is not granted for the children of rural-to-urban migrants, and they have to place their children into private and/or illegal schools. Those schools have a diverse level of quality, and thus the learning outcomes for students are not guaranteed. The Chinese concept of urban development had placed the rural to urban migrants into a dangerous situation for decades, which Ma referred to as objectification. Under this notion, people can be simplified as human capital, whose value comes from his/her contribution to economic development. Given that people are being regarded as human capital, there had been no need to revise the citizenship policy.

- Miller (2012, p. 1) acknowledges that "[t]he journey from farm to city is the story of China's transformation from a poor and backward country to a global economic superpower." Nonetheless, he analyzes how the *hukou* system, a system that grants rural and urban citizens different citizenship since 1958, discriminates against the people who migrate to the urban centers. He agrees with the fast-paced urbanization in China as a development strategy, but he also stresses that allowing rural migrants to become full urban citizens is the key to boost consumption. Miller argues that migrants need to get social security and legal protection, and that the children of migrants need to be granted education rights.

- Mahmud and Sawada (2017) found out that air and water quality, as well as traffic accidents, were related to the subjective well-being of the people in Bangladesh. They conducted the study in seven areas in Metropolitan Dhaka and four areas in Metropolitan Chittagong. The study shows that the basic needs could be fragile for some urban citizens in Bangladesh. Mahmud and Sawada 92017, p. 228) propose that "while urbanization is important for growth and the economic emancipation of people, the considerable disadvantage of urbanization (density) lies in congestion, road safety, public health, environmental challenges, and affordable housing."

- Huq (2016) comments on several international workshops and meetings on migration and urbanization held in Dhaka towards the end of 2016. As rapid urbanization was the reality in Bangladesh, he argues that urbanization is not an issue to be prevented but to be managed. He suggests that more had to be invested in other cities and towns around the country to attract the migrants from the rural areas in order to soften the pressure for the capital, Dhaka, where the rapid urbanization was accompanied by a massive slum population. Speaking of slum-dwellers, Huq (2016) suggests that they deserve to be treated like other citizens and be provided with services, such as water, sanitation, electricity, and healthcare. He also suggests that it is important to engage the people in lower social status into the process of decision-

making regarding urbanization. He acknowledges that this will not be easy, but that we need to think about shifting the emphasis from infrastructure to people, with a bias in favor of the poorest and most vulnerable people.

III. Socioeconomic Background

This section analyzes the data from the World Bank (2019) for three indicators, namely PPP-adjusted GDP per capita, life expectancy and literary, to gain some insight on the evolution and level of development of Bangladesh and China. As shown in Figure 1, in 1990, Bangladesh had a purchasing power parity (PPP)-adjusted GDP per capita of $1,288, while China's was $1,526. In 2017, Bangladesh's GDP per capita had increased to $3,524, which is nearly three times its 1990 value. China's GDP per capita increased to $15,309 in 2017, which is slightly more than ten times its 1990 value. Hence, while the two countries had nearly the same GDP per capita in 1990, there is now a huge gap in the level of GDP per capita between Bangladesh and China.

Figure 1: PPP-adjusted GDP per capita (constant 2011 international $), 1990-2017
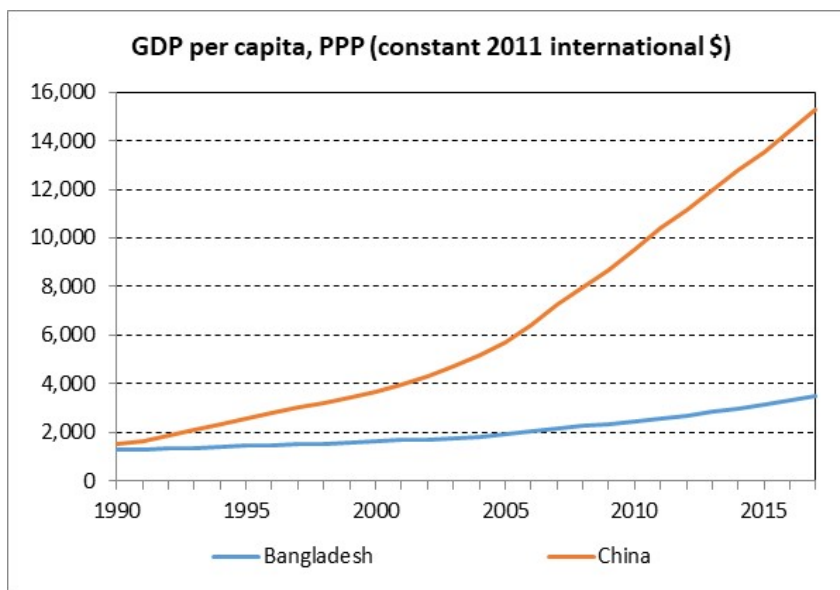
Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2019).

With regards to life expectancy (shown in Figure 2), the discrepancy between the two countries is not as big as for GDP per capita. For Bangladesh, the life expectancy at birth had increased by 25.0 years, from 47.5 years in 1970 to 72.5 years in 2016. China's life expectancy increased by 17.2 years, from 59.1 years in 1970 to 76.3 years in 2016. While China continues to have a longer life expectancy at birth than Bangladesh, the difference between the two countries narrowed from 11.6 years in 1970 to 3.8 years in 2016.

Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth (years), 1970-2016
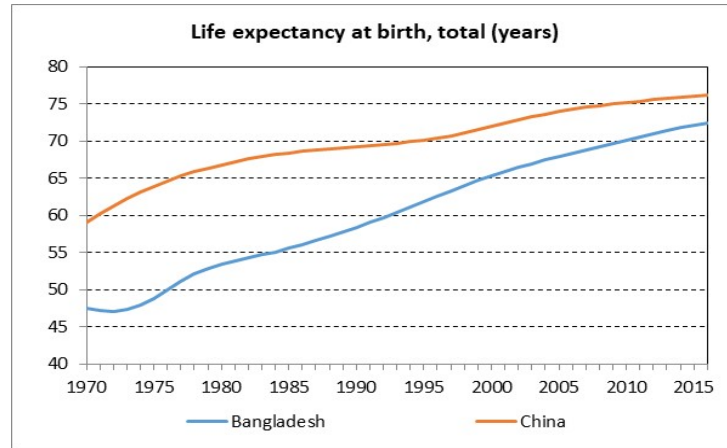
Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2019).

Consistent with the data for GDP per capita and life expectancy at birth, Figure 3 shows that literacy rates have also improved in both countries. For Bangladesh, the adult literacy rate had increased by 43.5 percentage points over a period of 35 years: from 29.2 percent in 1981 to 72.0 percent in 2016. China had a literacy rate of 65.5 percent in 1982, which steadily increased to 95.1 percent in 2010. This implies an increase by 29.6 percentage points over a period of 28 years in China. Though this data implies an overall higher annual growth rate for Bangladesh, it should be pointed out that Bangladesh's higher annual growth rate is due to the very significant increase from 2011 to 2016. From 2001 to 2011, Bangladesh has made only marginal progress with increasing adult literacy.

Figure 3: Adult Literacy (percent of people ages 15 and above); all available years
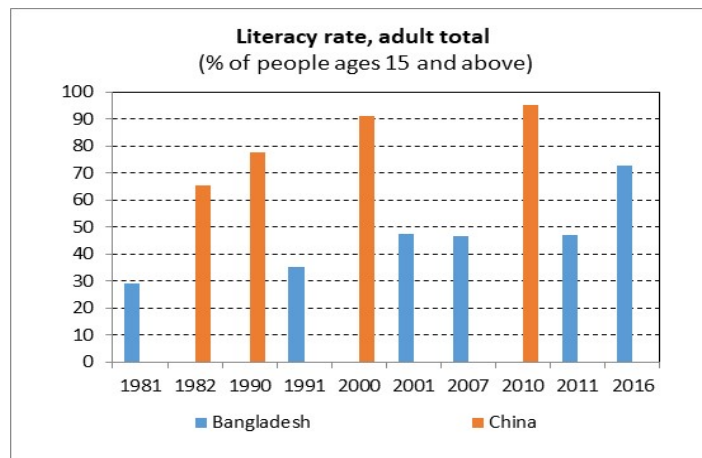
Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2019).

In conclusion, both Bangladesh and China have made huge progress in all three indicators. China has done much better than Bangladesh in terms of increasing GDP per capita, while Bangladesh has done better than China in terms of increasing life expectancy and literacy rates, though Bangladesh's life expectancy and literacy rates have been and remain below those of China.

120

IV. Key Facts on Urbanization in Bangladesh and China

This section examines the key facts related to urbanization, by analyzing the evolution of the share of the urban population, the share of the urban population living in the largest city, the percentage of the urban population living in slums, and the access rate of the urban population to electricity, drinking water and sanitation, always comparing Bangladesh with China.

IV.1. Rapid Urbanization

As shown in Figure 4, the percentage of the urban population has kept rising rapidly for both countries since 1970 for Bangladesh and since 1978 in China. In Bangladesh, the urban share of the population increased from 7.6 percent in 1970 to 35.9 percent in 2017, which is a an about seven-fold increase. In China, the urban share of the population increased from 17.4 percent in 1970 to 58.0 percent in 2017, which is slightly more than a three-fold increase. While both countries are facing fast-paced urbanization, China's share of urban population has grown more than Bangladesh in absolute terms, though Bangladesh's share has grown more in relative terms.

Figure 4: Share of Urban Population (percent of total), 1970-2017
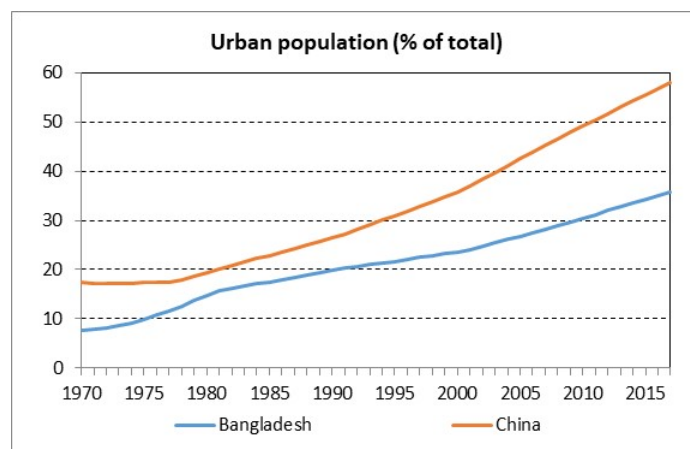
Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2019).

Figure 5: Share of Urban Population in the Largest City (percent), 1970-2017
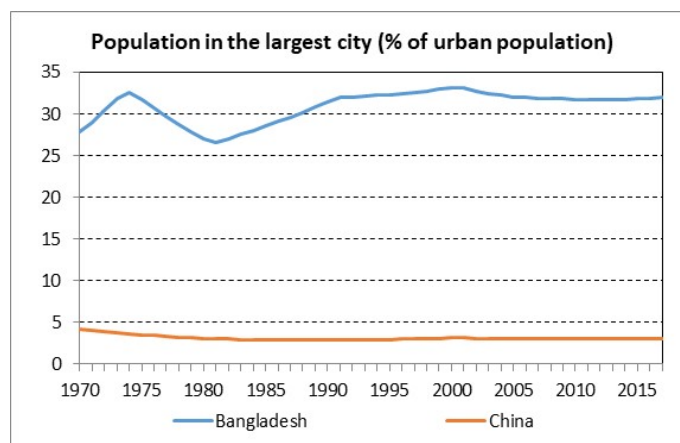
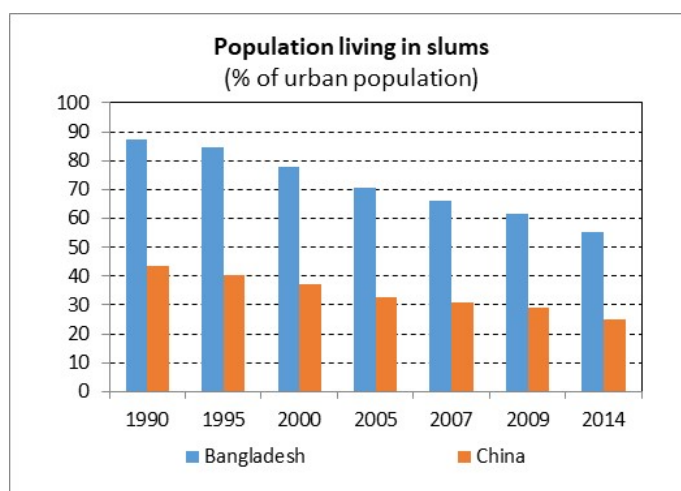Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2019).

Comparing Figures 4 and 5, we can see that even though Bangladesh has a far lower share of its total population living in urban areas, the percentage of urban population living in the largest city is significantly higher in Bangladesh than in China. This indicates that Bangladesh's urbanization is mostly focused on Dhaka, while China's urbanization is spread out over many urban centers. Indeed, as shown in Figure 5, less than five percent of China's urban population live in Shanghai (China's most populous city; with a slightly higher population than the capital: Beijing), where about one third of Bangladesh's urban population lives in Dhaka (Bangladesh's most populous city and capital).

IV.2. Population Living in Slums

The percentage of urban population who are living in slums is a useful indicator to assess the living standard of the urban people. As shown in Figure 6, Bangladesh had 87.3 percent of the urban population living in slums in 1990, and it had been improving throughout the year. However, the ratio was still a disappointing 55.1 percent in 2014. For China, the ratio was 43.6 percent in 1990, which had gradually declined to 25.2 percent in 2014. Although improvements have been made in terms of reducing the percentage of urban population living in slums, having still more than half and more than one quarter of the urban population living in slums in Bangladesh and China, respectively, cannot be considered to be successful urbanization.

Furthermore, given that the number of people living in cities has increased drastically (due to positive population growth and the increase in the percentage of urban population, the absolute number of people living in slums has actually increased continuously in both countries. In Bangladesh, the number of people living in slums has increased from 18.4 million in 1990 to 29.4 million in 2014. In China, the number of people living in slums has increased from 130.9 million in 1990 to 186.5 million in 2014.[1]

Figure 6: Population living in slums (percent of urban population), all available years

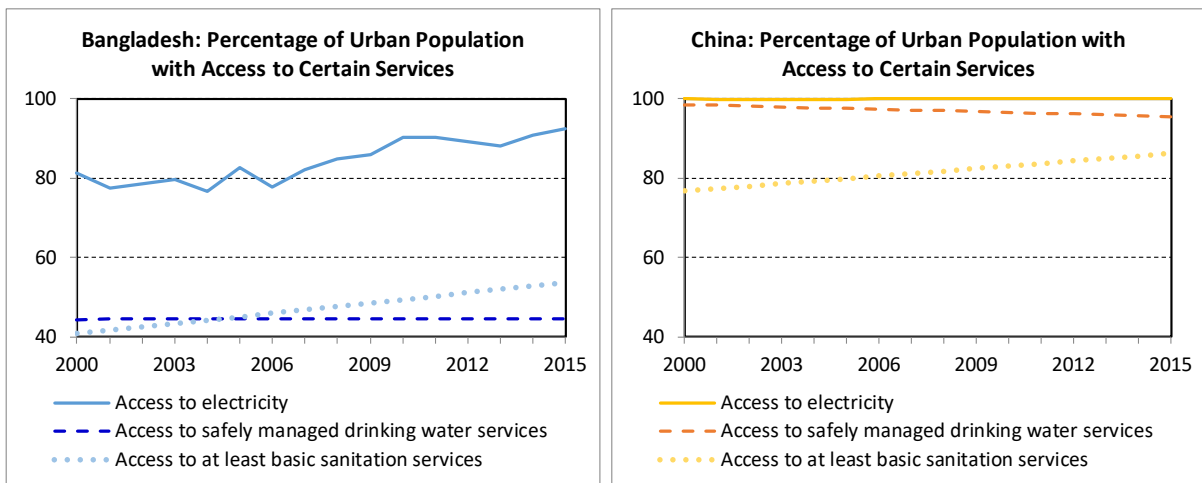

Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2019).

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[1] Calculations by author based on World Bank (2019) data for urban population and people living in slums as percent of the urban population.

IV.3. Access to Electricity, Drinking Water, and Sanitation

Access to electricity, drinking water and sanitation are also useful indicators to determine whether enough efforts have been made to address the structural changes of the population. As shown in Figure 7, Bangladesh has clearly failed the urban people to having access to safely managed drinking water services. The percentage of urban population with access increased only very marginally, from 44.53 percent in 2000 to 44.62 percent in 2015. Bangladesh has made some progress in increasing access to electricity, which increased from 81.2 percent in 2000 to 92.5 percent in 2015. The biggest progress Bangladesh has made among these three indicators is access to at least basic sanitation services, which increased from 40.7 percent in 2000 to 53.7 percent in 2015.

Comparing Figures 7 and 8, we can see that access rates to all three services are much higher in China than in Bangladesh. However, except with access to electricity, which has been universal in China for all the years we have such data, China also failed the urban population with having access to safely managed drinking water, where the percentage of the urban population decreased from 98.3 percent in 2000 to 95.5 percent in 2015. Like in Bangladesh, China also increased the access to at least basic sanitation services, from 76.6 percent in 2000 to 86.2 percent in 2015. Still, with the huge number of people living in urban areas, there are millions of urban people without access to water and sanitation.

Figures 7 and 8: Access to Electricity, Drinking Water, and Sanitation (percent of urban population), 2000-2015

Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2019).

V. Ethical Analysis

V.1. Ethical Foundations for Development

Astroulakis (2013) proposed a development ethics paradigm, which suggests that development should contain ethical aspects. He quoted Louis-Joseph Lebret to show that the meaning of development should not exclude a human's needs. Lebret had pointed out three categories of needs, namely essential subsistence needs, needs related to comfort and facilities which render life

easier, and enhancement goods. To apply the notion of development ethics paradigm to Bangladesh and China, both ethical theory (how one should live) and political economy (investigates the laws of political, economic and social life) have to be considered in the policy-making process.

Urbanization is a process of economic development, but the drawback can be that it turns out to overlook the needs of the people who are involved. As we have shown in the previous section, the rapid urbanization in Bangladesh and China has not been equivocal the improvement of the people living in the urban area. James Scott (1998, p. 89) proposed the concept of high modernism, in which he described it as "a particularly sweeping vision of how the benefits of technical and scientific progress might be applied - usually through the state - in every field of human activity." Scott (pp. 88-90) points out that high modernism is not an ideology as it has both right- and left-wing variants, however, high modernism can in a way change people's habits, work, living patterns, moral conduct, and worldview. High levels of urbanization and modernism leads to the illusion of high development, while ignoring the people that are excluded from the overall development.

V.2.   Democracy and Long-term Development

The basic needs issues are crucial for the evaluation of urbanization. As Astroulakis (2013) suggested the well-being of the people should be the one to be considered as it is the utmost important indicator of development. In order to apply this to the central part of urbanization, democracy, as Scott (1998) suggested, is inevitable. He pointed out (p. 101) that liberal democratic ideas are barriers towards high modernism in the sense that "the idea of a private realm has served to limit the ambitions of many high modernists." To attain this ideal, liberal democratic settings in a country are necessary. As Scott (p. 102) put it:

> The freedoms of speech, of assembly, and of the press ensure that widespread hunger will be publicized, while the freedoms of assembly and elections in representative institutions ensure that it is in the interest of elected officials' self-preservation to prevent famine when they can.

As a result, democracy, in both institutional and social senses, is needed to prevent high modernism from hurting the people. What is needed, as Scott said, is institutions that are "based on the assumption that the citizens should continually modify the laws and policies of the land" (p.357). This idea suggests that development is an ongoing process, in which no one should hold a certain power of agenda-setting. Every single person should have a say on what the city should look like.

Scott's critique echoes the ideas proposed by the *Human Development Report (HDR) 2000*.[2] The report reviewed the historical context of the human rights agenda during the cold war, when two covenants were adopted: one focusing on civil and political rights (which were pushed for by the Western countries), and another one focusing on economic, social and cultural rights (which were pushed by the Soviet Union and its allies). However, the two sets of rights are not divisible as both are needed to be developed to strengthen each other. The HDR 2000 then pointed out that human development and human rights are both of the utmost importance and deserved equal attention.

The HDR 2000 defined human development as a process of enhancing human capabilities - to expand choices and opportunities so that each person can lead a life of respect and value. Moreover, the HDR 2000 stresses that human development provides a systematic assessment of

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[2] See United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2000).

economic and institutional constraints to the realization of human rights. To put it another way, focusing on human development can enhance freedom while paying attention to human rights can protect freedom itself. In this sense, both Bangladesh and China have to improve both the civil and political rights as well as the economic, social and cultural rights for its people, while Bangladesh has a heavier job to do to increase the basic needs for the urban population. As noted in Section IV, the basic needs of many urban people have not been met. The voice of those underprivileged living in undesirable circumstances has to be heard. The society should regard them as part of the stakeholders and consider their well-being in the decision-making process. As a result, the flaws of urbanization can be resolved.

In the long-run, it is of utmost importance for both countries to install democracy in order to guarantee that the urbanized process will not overlook the well-being of its people and turn out that the city is developing for its own sake. Social engagement has to increase such that the voice of everyone within the urban area can be heard. To increase social engagement, the power-holding people have to share some of the power to the previously underprivileged whether in the forms of freedoms of speech, of assembly, and of the press (Scott's words) or civil and political rights (HDR 2000 words). If this is not the case, the urbanization process ignores that development should for all the people.

Democracy is about protecting the basic needs of people, and also sometimes go beyond it. For example, Qin (2018) reported that since 2015, there had been more than 400 local markets shut down in Beijing, which was a by-product accompanying rapid urbanization. For ordinary people, it resulted in higher living costs and inconvenient daily life. Although it went beyond the basic needs of the urban people, the issue was still important to be noticed in the sense that it highly affected the daily life of the people. If the respect of humans is one of the concerning factors regarding urbanization, then the people should have a say in these kinds of demolitions. As Qin (2018) pointed out, those markets were fields for building trust and social capital, where a system of care and love bounded the neighborhood.

Figure 9: Democracy Index (0-10 scale)
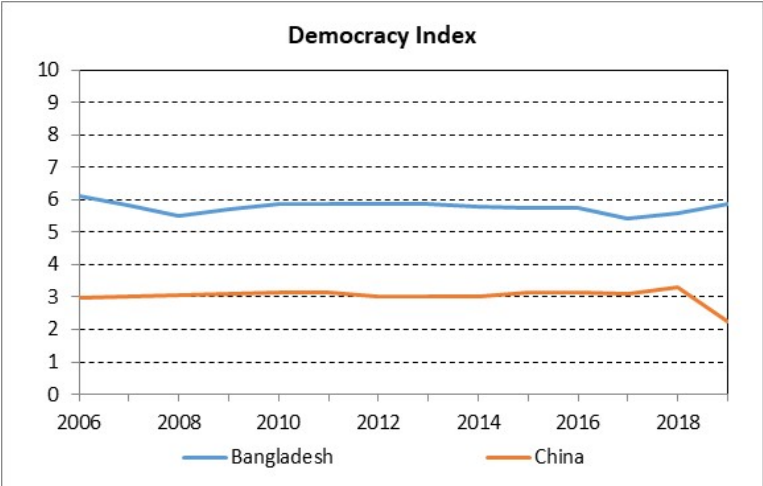
Source: Created by the author based on Economist Intelligence Unit (2019), Table 3, data for 2007 and 2009 are, respectively, averages of 2006 and 2008, and 2008 and 2010.

Based on the Economist Intelligence Unit's (2019) democracy index, which ranks countries from a low score of 0 to a high score of 10,[3] the overall score for Bangladesh was 5.88 in 2019 (which falls into the category of a hybrid regime), while China scored a poor 2.26 in 2019 (which falls into the category of an authoritarian regime). As Figure 9 shows, China has been ranked lower than Bangladesh in terms of the degree of democracy for all years such data exists (2006 to 2019). Figure 9 also shows that overall, both countries have been relatively stable in their score, though comparing 2006 with 2019, both countries' score have deteriorated, especially in China.

According to the Reporters Without Borders' (2019) world press freedom index[4], Bangladesh ranked 146 (scored 50.74) while China ranked 177 (scored 78.92) out of 180 regions in 2018, whereby a higher ranking and a higher score implies less press freedom. Figure 10 shows the evolution of these two countries' ranking from 2013 to 2019, which shows that overall, both countries have worse rankings (that is the rank is higher) in 2019 compared to 2013. By commenting on the two countries, Reporters Without Borders (2019) assessed Bangladesh's and China's press freedom as follows:

> Bangladeshi journalists have been among the leading collateral victims of the tougher methods adopted by the ruling Awami League and its leader, Sheikh Hasina, the country's prime minister since 2009. The campaign leading up to her re-election in late 2018 was accompanied by a disturbing increase in press freedom violations, including violence by political activists against reporters in the field, the arbitrary blocking of news websites, and arbitrary arrests of journalists.[5]

> By relying on the extensive use of new technology, President Xi Jinping has succeeded in imposing a social model in China based on control of news and information and online surveillance of its citizens. At the same time, he has been trying to export this oppressive model by promoting a "new world media order" under China's influence.[6]

**Figure 10: Ranking based on World Press Freedom Index
(out of 180 countries and regions), 2013-2019**
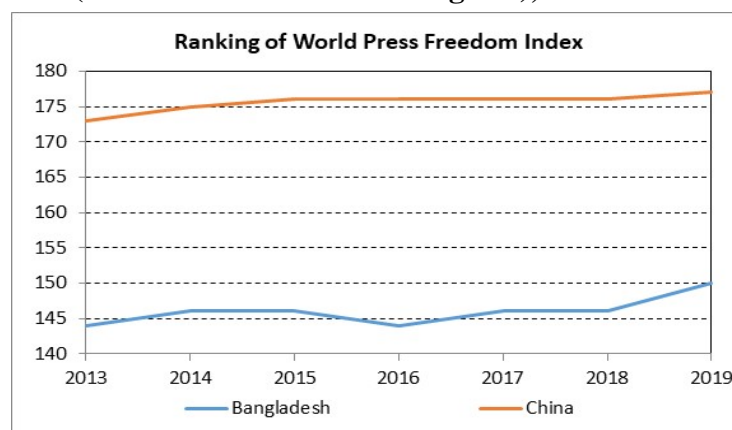
Source: Created by the author based on data provided by Reporters Without Borders (2019).

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[3] The index is based on civil liberties, political culture, political participation, the functioning of government and electoral process and pluralism. Based on the index, countries are then categorized into four types of regimes, namely full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes.

[4] The index was conducted based on the criterion of pluralism, media independence, environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency, infrastructure, and abuses.

[5] First paragraph of assessment, available at: https://rsf.org/en/bangladesh.

[6] First paragraph of assessment, available at: https://rsf.org/en/china.

Although Bangladesh attained a better ranking than China in terms of press freedom, both countries have been performed poorly. And the comments from the Reporters Without Borders suggest that both countries' existing authorities had been harming democracy by damaging the freedom of the press, which is a critical factor for a functioning democracy.

VI.   Conclusion

Urbanization and economic growth are interrelated. However, urbanization has brought challenges for Bangladesh and China. This article finds that both countries had undergone rapid urbanization, which is highly centralized on Dhaka in Bangladesh, while it is more spread out over many urban centers in China. Though progress has been made with reducing the percentage of people living in slums in both countries, the fact that still more than half (55.1 percent) of Bangladesh's urban population and more than one quarter (25.2 percent) of China's urban population still live in slums is unacceptable.

With regards to fulfilling the basic needs of its urban citizens, China has higher access rates to electricity, drinking water, and sanitation than Bangladesh. Nonetheless, both countries need to do a better job in creating a more just society. More specifically, both countries need to change their flawed urbanization of the past decades, which will not be easy as a further increase in the urban population will bring new challenges in the coming years.

By applying ethical perspectives, this article suggests that more needs to be done to fulfill the basic needs of the urban population. And to ensure long-term human-based urbanization, it's utmost important to install democracy in both countries so as to empower every stakeholder to speak up. However, the brutal reality is that the authorities in both countries do not like the idea of empowering their people. Given the poor performance of the two countries in terms of freedom of speech and preserving democracy, it is not optimistic that the governments themselves will empower their people.

No one knows where the edge of high modernism is that triggers the people to stay hand-in-hand and resist against the authorities. But as Scott (1998) said, high modernism changes even the worldview of people, that is numerous people might turn out to take the unjust status quo for granted. However, if the people stand hand-in-hand and demand change, a more just society can be achieved. Human development and human rights, civil and economic rights, democracy and basic needs are never divisible. Overlooking one of them will in return harm the other ones.

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