

# The burden of history: Political legacies and polarisation



DR. SIEGFRIED  
O. WOLF

Political development and democratisation in Bangladesh have been largely determined by the way in which the country came into existence; a result of two traumatic events. The first one was the partition of British India in 1947 as a consequence of the transfer of power from the colonial ruler to the newly created states of India and Pakistan, the latter of which was geographically separated into a Western and an Eastern part. The second one was the War of Liberation, in which East-Pakistan successfully fought against the West Pakistani armed forces for secession. Soon after independence, Bangladesh underwent a variety of regime changes, from a multi-party democracy to a one-party system (BAKSAL/Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League). The growing authoritarianism evolved into a praetorian polity with periods of direct and indirect military rule and then reverted several times to a democratic form of government. At last, after the downfall of General Hussain Muhammad Ershad in 1990 and the subsequent 1991 elections, Bangladesh transformed from the primarily authoritarian presidential system back to its original democratic parliamentary system. In this context one can state that the years 1990 and 1991, which saw one of the largest political movements since Bangladesh's independence, are essential elements of the most significant political event in the country's history. It initiated a process of democratic stabilization and consolidation that is still continuing today. However, this transition process has been challenged by various political and socioeconomic factors on several occasions. The most notable of them is the military-backed caretaker government from 11 January 2007 to 29 December 2008 which constituted a period of emergency rule and 'democratic limpness'.

These changes relate to one of Bangladesh's biggest challenges today, namely the total political polarisation of state and society. Throughout the country's history, polarisation has hampered political institution building which, in turn, hindered the democratisation process. From an external

point of view, this raises the challenging question of how such tremendous antagonism and hostility could have developed in a society that is generally known for its high degree of ethnic, cultural and religious homogeneity, and which shares a collective memory of socioeconomic and political suppression, a genocide, war atrocities and other related crimes.

The Bangladesh Liberation War created a socio-political cleavage within the Bengali society. Rather than bringing the Bengali people together, the societal divide was only reinforced after the end of the war. The process of post-war factionalism finds its first and most momentous expression in the conflict between the 'Freedom Fighters' and the 'Returnees'; a confrontation between those who were directly involved in combating the Pakistan Armed Forces and those who remained in West-Pakistan for whatever reason and returned to the East after Bangladesh's successful secession. The deep conflict between these two groups derived from the fact that the freedom fighters received more favourable socio-economic treatments, benefits and privileges from the newly established independent government because of their active participation in the war. This confrontation peaked with the state's portrayal of the freedom fighters as 'war heroes' and the returnees as 'collaborators'. This is an equation which not only cast a dark shadow over the build-up of the Bangladesh Armed Forces but also created disturbances within the country's bureaucracy and other political institutions in which returnees and freedom fighters struggled for influence and control over resources. Keeping this in mind, it is important to note that this schism was further enforced by certain historical legacies which unfolded their tremendously negative effects only after the Bengali independence but which have their origins in the Pakistani period or in the time of British colonial rule. Therefore, in order to adequately understand today's political polarisation one has to realize that the seed of disharmony was already sowed by the British and stringently

continued by the West-Pakistani.

In this context, one must note that there is a 'historical mistrust' between civilians and soldiers. This is a phenomenon which finds its origins in colonial times. The primary responsibility of the British Indian soldiers was to safeguard the interests of the British Raj. First and foremost, this meant to maintain law and order, and especially included rooting out any nationalist movements, upheavals or other related disturbances. Therefore, all file-and ranks of the Indian British troops were indoctrinated to be 'anti-political' and averse against politicians, which were portrayed as 'no-account men' and elements undermining the 'social order and systemic solidarity'. This conflict regarding the discriminatory and anti-political outlook of the British Indian soldiers accepting the traditional role of a colonial army as an instrument of a foreign yoke and oppression was

significant elements which shaped the legacy of 'historical mistrust'. First, it created tremendous civilian threat perceptions towards any role of the military in politics. Second, the civilians showed that they had the capacities to establish a consensus against military rule. This created awareness among the military of potential threats towards any military rule from the general public (civil society), which is definitely a crucial argument of why the military's top brass in 1990 withdrew its support from General Ershad and in 2008 brought the appointed 'technocratic caretaker government' to an end. Another important historical legacy which turned out to be a heavy burden for the country's development is the existence of 'ideological cleavages'. Due to the marginalisation of the Bengalis in the military and the involvement of West Pakistani soldiers in discrimi-

thorniest of these disputes have oscillated around attitudes towards India, Secularism and Socialism. Many people in East Pakistan had a critical stand on the motives and actions of the Indira Gandhi administration in New Delhi in the Liberation War. Although India's involvement in the conflict wasn't met with much enthusiasm, general public opinion wasn't plainly anti-India because many Bengalis were aware of the advantages of New Delhi's support in case of an armed struggle. However, Indo-scepticism increased with the influx of the returnees and especially those who had served in West Pakistan's bureaucracy and military. The fact that India moved all sophisticated weapon systems captured from Pakistan out of Bangladesh created the accusation that India robbed the Bengalis of their liberation glory and gave credence to the suspicion that India was trying

and the notion of nationalism. As in Pakistan, Bangladesh's military rulers, under increasing influence of the returnees, promoted successfully a populist and religiously-hued nationalist discourse. In order to challenge the secular civilian type of 'vernacular nationalism' which was based on promoting the Bangla language, the army and returnees developed an Islam-inspired Bangladeshi nationalism. Islam became increasingly identified as an essential element of national identity and it diminished the significance of secularism and language, which had thus far been the mainstays of Bengali nationalism. Needless to say, the promotion of religion as a basis for the construction of a collective identity boosted a much narrower concept of citizenship.

Last but not least, factionalism was further enforced by the way in which the liberation war was organised. The original idea was to follow the conventional model and to set up regular units which would operate from Indian territory and, if possible, in collaboration with the Indian Army. However, after a conference in July 1971, the so called 'Teliapara strategy' was implemented. This strategy envisaged guerrilla 'hit and run' warfare, attempted to keep the Indian influence down to a low profile, and tried to extend the Liberation War into a 'people's war'. This decision had severe consequences: it not only presumed the involvement of the whole Bengali people into the war efforts, and it prepared the ground for another ideological battle which found its visibility in the confrontation between a pro-China versus a pro-Soviet Union camp, as two politicising pivots. Due to the major cultural, political, economic and administrative grievances between West and East Pakistan, various socialist and communist elements during the war came into existence. These groups identified the war against 'imperialist' West Pakistan not only as a struggle for independence but also as a 'class struggle'. As a result, the country's political institutions, and especially the military, inherited a remarkable 'leftist or socialist cleavage' which found its expression in the

confrontation between a pro-Maoist (Peking) and a pro-Marxist-Leninist (Moscow) stand. The 'Maoists' were in favour of a kind of 'production-oriented army' after the example of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. In other words, the army had to become an integral part of Bangladesh's production system, much unlike the anti-political British and Pakistani model which was also favoured by the 'Marxists'. The argument was that the country would not be able to afford to maintain a sufficient standing army to deal with any external threat if it was to be transformed into 'production-oriented army'.

As a result of these historical legacies, the hostility between the freedom fighters and returnees became so deeply entrenched into the minds of the people that it got accommodated and aggregated by the post-independence political system. Besides some cross-cutting tendencies the basic ideological frontiers remained and the societal split got marked by the arch-rivalry of two political parties, the AL and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) until today. From an institutional perspective this conflict got deeply entrenched into the political system by the establishment of a 'quasi-two-party-system' dominated by the AL and BNP as the leading national parties spearheaded by their respective leaders Sheik Hasina (AL) and Begum Khaleda Zia (BNP). Their unrestricted and unregulated struggles have not only derailed the country's development in all spheres of life but also let to various existential political and constitutional crises. The chaotic conditions which led to the appointment of the extended technocratic caretaker government must be seen as one of the most unfortunate peaks of this antagonism.

Given the on-going violent turmoil and political unrest, let us hope that history, mired in phases of violence and turmoil as it is, is not condemned to repeat itself.

The writer is a lecturer of Political Science and International Relations as well as a senior research fellow in the Department of Political Science, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University



especially resented by the Bengali people. This antagonism between the British Indian military and Bengali civilians was continued by the military-bureaucratic elites of West-Pakistan who sought to impose and maintain a repressive pattern of rule over its Eastern wing. In this period, the Bengalis experienced their first two direct West Pakistani military rulers Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan who neglected any kind of power-sharing with East Pakistan and implemented several discriminatory economic and socio-political discrimination measures, such as the exclusion of Bengalis from the military and civil service. These experiences lead to the formation of two

natory and repressive politics, the few existing Bengali units became highly politicized already before the Liberation War started. Undoubtedly, the war had a catalyzing effect on political awareness and sensitivity, but it also led to a breakdown of the military organisation inherited by the British and West Pakistanis. The most important feature of this was that no centralized chain of command was installed during the war. The decentralisation of leadership resulted in a growing 'lack of ideological understanding'. From the very beginning, the Bengalis have been plagued by ideological conflicts that led to political and societal fragmentation. The

to transform Bangladesh into a 'client state'. In sum, one can state that the India cleavage not only enhanced the hostility between returnees and freedom fighters but also helped to transmit it into post-independence politics and is gaining particular momentum in the context of sharing water and (maritime) border issues.

The political fragmentation process got further aggravated through the issue of secularism which gained political prominence after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the subsequent fall of his AL government. However, the debate on secularism comprised two interconnected dimensions: the role of Islam

THROUGHOUT  
THE COUNTRY'S HISTORY,  
POLARISATION  
HAS HAMPERED  
POLITICAL INSTITUTION  
BUILDING WHICH,  
IN TURN, HINDERED  
THE DEMOCRATISATION  
PROCESS