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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassec@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Bangladesh at a Crossroads: A Political Prognosis

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Introduction

Bangladesh is in the cusp of great changes. At this point in time it is standing at a crossroads. This is when its friends and its responsible citizenry must help point towards the right direction: one that leads towards stability and a structure of democratic good governance, and not the one towards chaos. There are two impending key watershed points: 25/26 October 2013, when the government in its existing form is expected to be dissolved; and 25 January 2014, by which time the next general elections are to be held. It is how the intervening period is managed which will determine the future of this country in the short or longer term. The choice of the path to traverse would be critical.

Societal Base

The justification for Bangladesh's political independence from Pakistan, and earlier from India, lies in the identity of the nation-state as both 'Bengali' and 'Muslim'. There is thus this duality of heritage. Historically, what is now the Bangladesh nation evolved through having to deal with the West Bengali Hindu community through the nineteenth and the first half of

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh, and he can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

the twentieth centuries, and later with their fellow-Muslims in Pakistan. It had taken three partitions to reach this point: Partition Mark I in 1905 when East Bengal was hived off from West Bengal and connected to Assam; Partition Mark II in 1947 when East Bengal became a part of Pakistan, separated from India; and finally Partition Mark III when East Bengal or East Pakistan delinked from Pakistan to emerge as a sovereign and independent State, Bangladesh.

The two streams of this nationhood, the *Bengaliness* and the *Muslimness* eventually and largely found expression in the two major political parties, the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) headed by Begum Khaleda Zia, though this may not be the whole truth. The volatile relationship between the two ladies notwithstanding, the ideological divide between the two is perhaps more in nuances than in substance. It is not easy to place the contemporary Bangladeshi in neat and rigidly separate boxes, linked to religion or community. Thanks to a Socratic, or an argumentative intellectual tradition that delights in challenging received wisdom, developed through decades of having to protect his flanks, the average Bangladeshi tends to be moderate and tolerant. As in all situations there are exceptions and ‘out-liers’ of course as reflected in the *Sharboharas* on the left, and *Jamaat-e-Islami* and the *Shibir* on the right. History demonstrates that stability depends on the ability to maintain equilibrium between the two attributes. Any imbalance causes conflict, and the restoration of stability is dependent on the correction of that imbalance.²

Mention must be made at this stage of another powerful component of the Bangladeshis, their middle class, and the very vibrant civil society. It refers to the intelligentsia, the professionals and the commercial sectors, among others. It comprises what may be said to be the new *bhadralok* of Bangladesh, akin to the earlier generation of Calcuttans of the same ilk. The term, literally meaning ‘gentlefolk’, denoted a ‘Weberian status group’ in Colonial Calcutta, who were oftentimes criticised for being overly fraternizing with the colonials. They were actually progressive *Protestants* in faith, who had broken off from the mainstream of Hinduism. According to the Chicago sociologist J.H. Broomfield, who was among the first to give the term a sociological connotation, they were distinguishable by many aspects of their behaviour, deportment, speech, habits, cultural values and sense of propriety.³ Civil societies act to prevent the State from monopolising truth and power. Partha Chatterjee sees post-colonial civil society as a ‘political society’, a part of horizontal international elite. Today they are linked mainly to the West, psychologically, intellectually, emotionally, and economically. Their membership with political parties is at times co-terminus. This category has an important role in correcting any imbalance between the two national attributes that could destabilise the society.

² For a fuller analysis, see: Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, ‘Prehistory of Bangladeshi Nationalism and a Theory of Tripartite Balance’, *Asian Affairs*, Vol IV, Number IV, December 1982, pp. 407-432

³ J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in Plural Society*, University of California Press, 1968, pp.5-6

Issue of National Reconciliation

The purpose of the International Criminal Court set up to try the alleged transgressors of human rights was not perhaps the traditional reconciliation that becomes necessary in a post-conflict situation. In Bangladesh the conflict occurred over four decades ago. Therefore it appears that the goal was the simple carrying out of justice rather than attempting reconciliation, albeit after a long time. But the time-gap threatened to erode the perception of absolute integrity, according to some analysts. This, despite the overwhelming sentiment in the country that the perpetrators of ‘human rights violations’ during the 1971 War of Liberation must be brought to the book in order to bring about a closure to that sad chapter of ‘collaboration’ of some locals with Pakistani repressive actions. The increasing alienation among different groups is tending to resurrect old conflicts. This is evidenced in the ‘*Shahbag* Movement’ that started in February 2013 spearheaded by largely secularist urban youth, and the ‘*Shapla Chattar*’ reaction of the younger generation of the opposite mould. That could be because a reconciliation process was in fact never effected or even initiated. In my own peace-building experience in other societies, during my time at the United Nations, to render reconciliation in a post-conflict society durable and self-sustainable, three dimensions need to be addressed: first, structural; second, relational; and third, personal.

With regard to the structural dimension, the parties must analyse the substantive causes of the conflict and initiate remedial measures. This must be borne in mind when organs within the state-system are created such as in the executive, legislative and judicial domains, and peace-enhancing elements must be put in place, such as human rights and rule of law.

The relational dimension reduces war-related hostility through repair and transformation of damaged relationships. Parties must acknowledge responsibility and guilt voluntarily and seek forgiveness and reconciliation. ‘Future-imaging’ that is, having a shared view of the future and knowing where they can go together can make it easier to get there. Past injustices can be recognised (through Truth and Reconciliation Commissions) and punished (through tribunals). However, retributive justice can often exacerbate wounds. Another option is to have reparative and restorative justice, with emphasis on building relationships between victims and offenders.

To address the personal dimension, the individual, or families who have experienced trauma must be helped through a process of healing. At the national level, Truth Commissions can uncover facts and render justice. At the community level, various rituals and ceremonies can alleviate pain. At an individual level, a micro-activity would be counselling, or if that is difficult, family units and activities can be supported. In other words, ‘victim-empowerment’ should be a key goal. Throughout the ‘peace-building’ process, ‘peace constituencies’ can be created. These would comprise teachers, social workers, religious leaders and others. They could initiate ‘hierarchical interventions’ at different levels. Eliminating intra-mural conflict

in societies will enable them to be moved along the path of progress, peace and development, all contributing to stability.⁴

The Changing Role of Religion

‘Muslimness’ is a defining attribute of the Bangladeshi national identity, which distinguishes it from neighbouring India, just as ‘Bengaliness’ distinguishes it from Pakistan. Therefore it is not possible to discount its role, which also finds a mention in the Constitution as the State Religion. It features largely in the public domain. This does not mean Bangladesh cannot create for itself a pluralist secularist society within the broad Muslim structure. Interestingly, wherever religion and the State have been structurally integrated, as in the United Kingdom, religion takes a back seat. Indeed, paradoxically, where the two are kept apart, as in the United States, the power of religion tends to burgeon because it becomes the champion of causes against wrongs perpetrated by the State. In contemporary Muslim-majority countries, the State is usually weak, so a linkage between State and religion does not strengthen the power of religion. And in fact may weaken it. But where the two are distinct, religion can become a powerful tool to take on the errors committed by a weak state (Egypt? Turkey?) It is true that 85 per cent to 90 per cent of Bangladeshis are Muslims. But they represent two sets of values. There are those grounded in the religion by faith and behaviour, and practise all rituals. Others are Muslims by heritage, as they are born as such, and are not strict practitioners. Yet they will answer to belonging to the Muslim community. They will also resist any overt attempts to undermine their religion. This larger group appears to have insufficient space in Society.

According to received wisdom, exposure to the Gulf countries and the Middle East of a huge number of migrant labour might have enhanced extremist fundamentalist and *salafist* tendencies in the worker-sending Muslim states. But empirical research by scholars at my Institute in Singapore, the Institute of South Asian Studies, shows that it is not the case. Very often the opposite is true in Pakistan and in Bangladesh. First, the South Asian workers are rarely exposed to the host community in a substantial way. Second, because of the remittances sent home by contractual workers, their children are often better-schooled, and, therefore, less likely to have extreme views, though this causal relationship cannot be logically established. More of negative consequences flow from *madrassas* (religious schools) that the Gulf State authorities help set up in these countries, though, ironically, many of the ideas said to flow from ‘*madrassas*’ would be unacceptable to the authorities in those very States.

⁴ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington DC, 1997

The Increasing Mobilisation of Youth

Like many other developing or Muslim-majority countries, there is a huge imbalance between the youth and the aged among the population in Bangladesh, the former preponderantly outnumbering the latter. Half the population is 24 years or under. This youth-bulge is seen as a ‘demographic dividend’ by some, and a ‘demographic curse’ by many. There are elements of truth in both perceptions. The greatest challenge to the governance system is to be able to mainstream them. This can be done through appropriate education (including the nationalisation of the *madrassa* curricula), through generating employment through Keynesian methods, and mobilising them through channelling their energies through sports and similar organised social activities. While on the one hand they can be modernising and progressive, on the flipside they can be inward-looking and even regressive. The aim should be to make the youth the tool to create a society based on doubt and reason as opposed to one based on so-called truth and conviction.

The Changing Gender Roles

Gender balance, indeed gender mainstreaming, has between for some years the success story of Bangladesh. Impressive indices have been recorded in terms of female education, income through tools like microcredit, employment as in the garment sector. Approximately 3.5 million people work in the garment sector, in roughly 5,000 factories, of which 2.9 million, or about 85 per cent are women, recent critique of such progress (by the leader of ‘*Hefazat-e-Islam*’) notwithstanding. The empowerment of women is palpable in day-to-day life.

It is noteworthy, though, that the time may have come for women to move up the ‘technology-chain’. The garment industry provides some skills, but these are minimal. Its greatest contribution lies in the empowerment and emancipation of women. The famous ‘telephone-ladies’ of the Bangladesh villages in the last decade demonstrated the women’s capacity and hunger for greater technical know-how. The wherewithal to satisfy this appetite would lead to great social benefits.

Political Party Dynamics

It seems that political parties in Bangladesh provide a classic example of what is generally known as ‘Duverger’s Law’. It comprises two hypotheses observed by Maurice Duverger, a French sociologist in the 1950s. One is that plurality voting system, first past the post, in a single-member constituency, favours the development of a two-party system. A second is that double-ballot voting system or proportional representation tends to lead to multi-partism. Of course this is not an absolute law (counterexamples exist) but mere tendencies.

In Bangladesh one can extrapolate another corollary. A slight majority can lead to an overwhelming preponderance in the legislature, with the slight minority nearly being

eliminated. This has led to minority abjuring the Parliament. Proportionate representation could correct this imbalance by reflecting the percentage of support in the legislature (say 34 per cent as opposed to majority 38 per cent). The numbers will provide an incentive to participate which otherwise would not be the case.

Poverty Reduction

According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2010 Household Survey 31.5 per cent of the population live below poverty line and 17.6 per cent were 'extremely poor'. According to a recent World Bank Report, in 2000, 48.9 per cent were living below poverty line, and 34.3 per cent were 'extremely poor'. Considering this, Bangladesh reduced poverty by 1.74 per cent every year since 2000. The UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDG) target was to bring poverty down to 29.5 per cent by 2015. According to the World Bank, Bangladesh should achieve the target two years ahead of the schedule. Multiple factors are responsible for the steady success of poverty alleviation efforts. Over the past years there has been a steady Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of 5.5 per cent to 6 per cent. The garment industry is thriving, earning US\$ 18 billion to US\$ 20 billion in exports, though some recent unfortunate accidents, including the collapse of a factory-building called 'Rana Plaza' leading to deaths of over 1,000 workers, have attracted serious negative attention in the importing world. The government and the industry are desperately seeking to correct these negative perceptions by initiating measures to improve working conditions.

Possible Scenarios

In the preceding decade and half, the Constitution provided for a Caretaker government, comprising non-political individuals, for a period of three months, to hold elections (except for the one installed in January 2007, under Emergency rules, that held office for two years, till January 2009). The Awami League led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina swept the polls in the elections then held, and occupied an overwhelming over-two-third majority in the Parliament. Much to the chagrin of the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party of Begum Zia, the Awami League thereafter struck off the Caretaker system from the Constitution, insisting that the next elections scheduled to take place in January 2014 would be held under her aegis. The BNP then initiated a movement, that included a series of *hartals* or 'general strikes', many turning violent, demanding restoration of the caretaker, or at any rate a non-party neutral system to supervise the polls, without which they argued the elections would not be free, fair and credible, and hence they would not participate (deemed necessary, for the polls to be judged as such). This debate, in a fierce fashion continues. It is likely to intensify at the end of the 'fasting month' of Ramadan in August 2013.

Meanwhile, in a string of mayoral elections, the BNP was victorious. The Awami League points to this as a demonstration of fair polling under the current system. The BNP draws a distinction between municipal polls and a national vote which might involve change of State-

wide political power. The need for cutting this Gordian knot of impasse becomes sharper with each passing day as the government would need to be dissolved three months ahead of the polls, that is around 25 October (elections due next 25 January). The issue is what happens thereafter; how is the country to be governed, and under whose watch should the elections be held? With the Prime Minister in office, insists the Awami League; totally unacceptable, the BNP retorts. So, is a train-wreck inevitable?

Not necessarily. But some kind of a formal or informal agreement between the two major protagonists, AL and BNP would be required to avoid such a disaster. But alas, sometimes there have been in this country the propensity of some political units to self-destruct. The best scenario after the dissolution of the current government on or around 25 October 2013 would be an agreement between the two major parties, a German-style ‘Grand Coalition’ of the AL and BNP for the intervening period, with that government holding elections. Best, but unlikely. Nothing so far suggests that the two parties can develop that kind of understanding in the short time available.

A second scenario is that the incumbent Prime Minister remains in office (a backing-down on this count may not at this stage seem feasible to her, though she can voluntarily reduce her influence), appoints a set of neutral technocrats (who are also perceived as such) as ministers for the next three months from 25 October, who hold elections under close domestic and international monitoring, and allow for ‘peaceful passage’ to the post-election system.⁵ It is possible that the BNP, many of whom already smell victory, may see this as the best available bargain (particularly if they can be intellectually persuaded that the election would not be unduly influenced by the head of the cabinet), and less clumsy than the idea of non-participating in the elections and pulling down an elected government (with a modicum of national and international support). This government need not be described as ‘caretaker’ or ‘interim’ but merely ‘transitional’, with such wordage or terminology satisfying all sides.

A third scenario would be that the incumbent Prime Minister steps aside, the President forms a government of entirely new faces, comprising some apolitical persons and others with political views but perceptible social acceptance. This might include members of the Awami League and BNP as well.

What will vastly help all around, and also contribute enormously to a positive electoral culture for the future, is an accord on a ‘Code of Conduct’ against post-election reprisals by the winning side. This could be negotiated by the Election Commission, or by some designated ‘facilitators’(by the President?), and should neither come to pass, by the ‘good offices’ of a recognised international authority (Should the UN play this role, no side need perhaps object, particularly if the end-result is the possibility of a period of post-polls stability.)

A fourth scenario, a tragic one, would be continued intransigence on all sides, heightening of violence leading to utter chaos, with the armed forces intervening. In all fairness to them, they have as yet displayed no such predilections to do so, and indeed do not appear to have

⁵ According to the Bangladesh Constitution, a government holds office for a period of five years or less.

the stomach for it. Should this transpire, the new authorities would perhaps need to undertake some fundamental reforms before a return to the *status quo ante*. This may have uncertain consequences for the democratic process, as well as for any specific time-frames.

An important point about the scenarios is that they are not conceived as neatly organised boxes. What might actually happen could be an amalgam of two or more of these, with some elements drawn from each. But public acceptance of the method is an essential prerequisite. People must see the endeavour in its entirety as something ‘good’. As Plato had said famously, and it is both a philosophical and ethical axiom today, that a ‘part’ cannot be good if the ‘whole’ is not.

Conclusion

What will happen to Bangladesh in the long run will be determined by the developments in the short run between now and January 2014. Bangladesh is a country of huge potentials, and can become a model for many developing countries of comparable milieu to emulate. The Greek sage Heraclitus had said, and it is an incontrovertible axiom, that everything is in a flux, and you can never step into the same river twice. This is also true of Bangladesh. The challenge to the leadership is to ensure that the moving stream is flowing in the right direction.

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