

ISAS Brief

No. 596 – 8 August 2018

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Revolt of the Teens: Bangladesh's Gathering Clouds?

A street revolt of teens in Bangladesh, originally aimed at road-safety, following the killing of two students by a speeding bus on 29 July 2018, is now rapidly spreading in scope and dimension, threatening to engulf the entire country. With elections due in less than five months, it has the potential for a significant impact on the nation's political future. This paper examines the relevant events and analyses them against the broader global matrix, underscoring their universal ramifications.

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

It has been a long tradition in Bengal that students and politics are inseparable. The tendency was encouraged during the pre-partition independence movement of the 1940s. Both the key organisations in the political space, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, unabashedly used it to buttress their positions. The reasons were not far to seek. First, in a milieu where literacy was abysmally low, students, with their educational credentials, were perceived as adding value to the intellectual narratives of their preferred political protagonists. Second, prevalent social mores emphasised empathy, sympathy and

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

understanding towards and of the young ‘children’ of the land, often viewed as ‘mother’. Third, they generally came from the ‘bhadrolok’ segment of society, a Weberian social category in 19th century Calcutta, comparable to the middle class in Britain and Europe, but with its unique predilections of admiration for things British as well as repugnance towards them. Finally, the young in Bengal, as elsewhere, tended to be idealistic (British Indian ‘resistance politics’ were often attractive from that angle) and provided a reasonably good catchment area for recruitment by political entities.

The culture was inherited by both East and West Bengal after the Partition of British India of 1947. The former had gone to Pakistan and the latter to India. Understandably, the territorial dichotomisation also led to the different evolution of the phenomenon on either side. In West Bengal, the students, notably of the Calcutta University, played an active role in the ensuing left movements, both moderate and extreme, and, thereafter, in contemporary post-left era. The contribution of the youth was more marked in East Bengal, as this province, now of Pakistan, progressed from its status as East Pakistan to a sovereign Bangladesh in 1971. This paper focusses on them.

When the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, announced that Urdu would be the state Language of Pakistan, the students in Dhaka, the capital of then East Bengal, opposed it as early as in 1948. Then, they sought to articulate themselves, with success in obtaining such recognition for their mother-tongue, Bengali, through what came to be known as the Language Movement of 1952. In many ways, it added a powerful Bengali component to the Muslim identity of the people, leading to a nationalistic sentiment, comprising the two components of ‘Bengaliness’ and ‘Muslimness’. These two characteristics both coexist and compete with each other, not only in the community, but also often within the same individual. The students in East Pakistan had a significant role in the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. It initiated the movement which later on was passed on to the senior leadership of the Awami League (AL), led by Bongobandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the acknowledged ‘Father of the Nation’. Eventually, Bangladesh became a sovereign entity with Indian military intervention in 1971.

In the nearly five decades of Bangladesh’s history, the elements of ‘Bengaliness’ and ‘Muslimness’ began to be broadly, though not exclusively, led by two political parties. One,

the AL, led by Sheikh Hasina, the current prime minister, daughter of Sheikh Mujib who was killed in a putsch in 1975. Hasina and the AL largely underscored the Bengali values, a corollary of which was commitment to secularism. The other was the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), chaired by Begum Khaleda Zia, a former prime minister and wife of an assassinated President, Ziaur Rahman, whose party veered towards Islam, albeit in a moderate fashion. The relationship between the two parties was so bitter that the international media dubbed the leadership as the “Battling Begums”. They alternated in government for over a decade and half, with the army, at times, inserting itself, both directly and indirectly. The bitter political scenarios necessitated the ‘mechanism’ of a ‘caretaker government’ to hold elections and ensure peaceful transfer of power. This system was scrapped by Hasina, the reason why the BNP boycotted the polls in 2014 fearing massive riggings, giving the AL government a walkover. Through a number of clever political moves, the AL disempowered the BNP completely and was finally able to commit Begum Zia to prison on corruption charges. As such, in the period between 2014 and now, the AL-led government has enjoyed a free run of governance. There were many developmental achievements, and in several socio-economic indices, the performance equalled and even bettered many neighbouring Indian states. Then again, there were also allegations of mismanagement, corruption and the politicisation of the instruments of government, including of the police and of the bureaucracy. However, its control over governance appeared unchallengeable.

Till now! Five years on, elections are due in the winter of 2018-19. An eerie calm had descended over the politics of the nation. Some would argue that the inability to give expression to dissent was slowly building a powder keg during this period. Then, on 29 July 2018, an incident happened that has the potential for an enormous impact on the future course of the nation. A speeding bus killed two students. It seemed to have the effect of a lit matchstick on the powder keg. Spontaneously, thousands of teens, mostly school children, came out to block the streets. They demanded ‘nirapod shorok’ (road safety). They also took over traffic control, checking the automobile licenses of ‘ministers and minions’, and presenting a ‘nine-point demand’. The list addressed largely, though not exclusively, the notorious traffic situation in the country, which had claimed many lives. A concerned minister, Shahjahan Khan, who, in an obvious example of a conflict of interest (he was also the Chief of the Transport Union), was alleged to have thought the accident was blown out of proportion and had tried to laugh it away. It proved to be a costly show of mirth. The students were not

amused. They promptly called for his resignation, or better still, dismissal, and poured into the streets to begin a movement that rocked the nation and drew the attention of the world.

The government was now caught between Scylla and Charybdis. If Khan quits, this would be interpreted as succumbing to the pressure of anti-AL forces. If he does not, it would be standing up to a burgeoning public demand. So nothing was done in this respect. The government, however, claimed that it had accepted all other demands of the teens. However, the problem was that, on other occasions, as with an agitation against discriminatory public hiring (known locally as quota issues), assurances given at the prime-ministerial levels were not carried out. So the credibility of the current undertakings was questioned. The demand for more palpable and immediate actions, such as the resignation or dismissal of Mr Khan heightened. The police, now put wholly and squarely on the carpet by the demonstrators, allegedly sought help of the AL students-wing known as 'Chhatro League' (Students League), which responded positively with unrestrained enthusiasm. Its members, said to be armed with sticks, stones and guns, assisted the law-enforcers in clearing the streets of agitating teens, particularly from a suburb of Dhaka named Jhigatola. Inevitably, fatalities resulted. Over the weekend, older university students joined their younger peers. A symbolic march to Jhigatola by a combination of older and younger students on 5 August 2018 led to further casualties. The turmoil is now spreading like wildfire throughout the entire country. There is apparently a policy vacuum as to how to deal with the still evolving crisis.

Alas, for the ruling party, troubles do not seem to come singly. The Jhigatola incident would provide a window of opportunity for political forces to openly join the fray in the guise of expressing solidarity with the students. In any case, despite protestations to the contrary, no action or discourse on civic issues can be apolitical, as the teen-revolt was originally made out or claimed to be. It was from the beginning about power, whether in traffic monitoring or overall governance as all politics is. Politics, by definition, cannot be divorced from civic issues. One of the slogans chanted was 'we want justice'. The term 'justice' has an all-encompassing connotation covering the entire spectrum of 'rights' and 'deliveries' by the state with regard to their protection and preservation. If this is not politics, nothing is. As a noted Dhaka University academic remarked that what the students were checking of government functionaries were not their license to drive their cars, but the license to run the country!

To complicate matters, a group of armed vandals attacked the vehicle of American Ambassador to Bangladesh, Marcia Bernicat, who has been critical of late of the arrangements with regard to the impending polls. This incident has now risked the problem of being internationalised. The relations with the United States which takes very dim view, to say the least, of attacks on its ambassadors since the killing of one in Libya some years ago, could become strained. Already western political entities, including their embassies, are known to hold sentiments similar to those of Ambassador Bernicat. Some observers believe that the government had plausible plans of dividing up the BNP and getting elements within it to participate in the elections, even with Begum Zia incarcerated, by assuring them of a decent representation in the parliament. That probability seems to be well beyond the rim of the saucer at this time. It is possible the BNP smells a possible access to power through polls or other modes of interplay of politics, and may be prone to stay away from the hustings. The prospects of the government of yet another ‘return to office’ without contest in elections do not inspire confidence in terms of securing international credibility.

These developments deserve to be examined against a theoretical background. The ‘teen revolt’, now spreading rapidly to include older youth, has several noteworthy elements.

First, the demographic shift in favour of the young in society has tended to activate not just the youth, but also the younger ones, the teens and even children, a particular feature of the turmoil in Dhaka.

Second, the protests in Bangladesh reflect the anticipation of the young for a fruitful future and their exasperation with their exclusion from having a say in their own destiny. The youth in Bangladesh are obviously crying out to be heard. They see themselves as being increasingly marginalised in society. For instance, the authorities, to keep up with the global Joneses, are seeking to introduce a ‘digital Bangladesh’. The students, however, have said last week that rather than a ‘digital Bangladesh’, they would prefer one that is “secure and free”!

Third and finally, the lack of any avenue to give vent to their pent-up feelings was another major reason for the explosion. The youth, the teens and their older peers, felt that the existing political structures and institutions were insufficient to provide them this scope. Too

many of these were already mobilised by the authorities to further their own perceived interests. The only 'institution' possibly left to them was the 'street'. Hence, the outburst was not entirely unlike the Arab Spring, or to cite an earlier example, the tumultuous days in Paris in May 1968 when French students took to the streets under the slogan, among others, 'no class today, no ruling class tomorrow'. The phenomena that we are witnessing in Bangladesh have both regional and universal ramifications. The happenings in Dhaka, unprecedented even by South Asian standards, therefore, provide lessons for all in our times.

It is still possible that the turmoil in Dhaka and beyond in Bangladesh will subside. However, political events do not suddenly end in that they morph into other developments. At any rate, they tend to alter the prevalent political culture and mores in a way that there is no going back. The age of political consciousness has been lowered in Bangladesh for all times. Already the impact on neighbouring Kolkata has been felt, where there have been demonstrations of sympathy by students. The social media in Pakistan have also shown the young showing empathy for their kindred spirits. Both Indian and Pakistani youth have stated in their internet 'posts' and texts that they too confront similar issues. The global media has been according the movement wide coverage. These go to show that the global public, particularly today's youth, share common perceptions and are able to show understanding among themselves, even when their governments differ.

In Bangladesh itself, any calm that will ensue as the dust of the incidents settles down, will only paper over the strong currents swirling below, generated by the recent events. The possibility of their surfacing with the slightest situational change, at any given moment in the future, will remain strong. Bangladesh may indeed be at a crossroads, or at a point of inflexion in its march towards an inscrutable future of both challenges and possibilities.

.