

Bangladesh's Political Evolution: Growing Uncertainties

Sreeradha Datta

Abstract

Unlike many Third World countries, Bangladesh has remained relatively stable and peaceful and escaped from major internal upheavals. While the democratic transition in 1991 was slow and painful, democratic change of governments has become the norm. Leaders are changed through ballots and not bullets and power oscillates between the two principal parties.

Despite these developments, Bangladesh is in the midst of a host of internal crises which could potentially undermine long-term national stability. The polity, is dominated by changing national identities, growing Islamic fervour in the society, personalised politics, weak institution building, absence of political accountability, lack of responsible opposition and worsening law and order situation leading to the induction of the military in civic duties. Individually these factors are neither unique to Bangladesh nor a serious challenge to its stability. As the paper would argue, Bangladesh belied the promise of democracy it held out at the time of its foundation. This paper seeks to understand the dynamics of the developments that Bangladesh is in the grips of.

Pre-occupied with personal animosities and rivalries, the government of the day is unable to address the basic issues such as protection of lives and Properties of ordinary citizens. The introduction of special courts, tough legislations and military assistance could partly remedy the situation. The consolidation of democracy along with checks and balances, greater accommodation and tolerance of political differences, are essential if Bangladesh were to avoid the return of military rule.

—★—

Three decades after its birth, Bangladesh is at the crossroads and is preoccupied with a number of challenges rooted in its political culture or lack of it. In 1971 when it separated from Pakistan, Bangladesh held the promise of a stable democracy. But the promise was soon belied. After the rule of the founder leader Mujibur Rahman who soon turned authoritarian, Bangladesh was to eventually witness military rule that would last until 1991. Prolonged public protest, mounting domestic unrest and

dwindling political legitimacy compelled Gen. H.M. Ershad to relinquish office in favour of a neutral non-political administration to conduct elections to the Jatiya Sangsad (parliament). The process of electoral politics ushered in 1991 is firmly in place and Bangladesh has witnessed periodic elections in 1996 and 2001 that were considered to be free and fair by neutral international observers.

The polity, however, is dominated by changing national identities, growing Islamic fervour in society, personalised politics coupled with weak institution building, absence of political accountability, lack of a responsible opposition and a worsening law and order situation leading to the induction of the military in civil duties. Individually these factors are neither unique to Bangladesh nor a serious challenge to its stability.

While democratic functionalities continue, there is a growing number of uncertainties. The paper delineates four broad trends that currently dominate the domestic political environment: political instability; problems of governance; Islamisation; and dangers of extremism and weakening social cohesion. Even though the governments that came to power since 1991 headed by Khaleda (1991-96) and Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001) have completed their five-year terms in office, the 1990s witnessed a serious domestic crisis. Lack of public trust in the elected government has made the caretaker administration an integral component of Bangladeshi politics. At the same time, the onset of regular elections has not removed mass politics, public protests and *hartals*. Political parties employ extra-parliamentary protest actions as an effective means of unseating the elected government and, thereby, plunge Bangladesh into political instability.

The weakening of the democratic process is compounded by Bangladesh's failure to evolve institutions to reign in the authoritarian tendencies of the rulers. If protest actions outside the Jatiya Sangsad weaken the parliament, absence of a clear division of responsibilities among various branches of the state has led to concentration of power in the hands of the Executive.

Political instability and problems of governance are conducive to the growth of religious extremism in Bangladesh. Driven by political compulsions and calculations, the major political parties have encouraged the growth of religious feelings, especially the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) that propagated the ideology of the Muslim League. The growth of extremism is an unintended consequence of this process. In a parallel development, Bangladesh is witnessing signs of social fragmentation due to the alienation of the minority population. The failure of the civilian authorities to provide basic security to citizens has recently led to a nationwide crackdown by the army.

Political Instability

The transition into democracy is still unstable and lacks consolidation. The holding of regular, periodic, free and fair elections to the Jatiya Sangsad is a welcome departure from the pre-1991 phase when elections were a cosmetic exercise to legitimise the ruling elite.¹ Even though three national elections were held since then (1991, 1996 and 2001), the process is still unstable. Opportunistic alliances, immaturity of the leadership, unwillingness to recognise and accept the popular verdict and lack of a responsible opposition make the polity fragile and insecure.

Coalition Politics and Political Opportunism

Since 1991 when the first multi-party elections were held, four parties, three personalities, two families and one problem have dominated Bangladeshi politics:

- Four Parties—Awami League, BNP, Jatiya Party, Jama'at-e-Islami
- Three Personalities—Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia, H.M. Ershad
- Two families—Rahman and Zia families
- One problem—Personal animosity among leaders of the major parties

Until Mujib was assassinated in 1975, the Awami League dominated the Bangladeshi political scene. Gen. Ziaur Rahman who came to power through a military coup in 1977 sought to consolidate his power base and floated the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Gen. Ershad who deposed President Abdus Sattar in a bloodless military coup in 1982 followed the same example and founded the Jatiya Party. Both the Awami League and BNP followed a distinct pattern; in the wake of the assassination of the Awami League leader, the party leadership went to his immediate relative, daughter (Hasina) and in case of the BNP leader to his wife (Khaleda). For its part, the Jatiya Party has largely remained a military-establishment party and was on the wane since the restoration of democracy in 1991.² The Jama'at, which benefited by the removal of the ban on religious parties in 1976, gradually consolidated its base and edged out moderate religious parties such as the Muslim League, which unlike the Jama'at, was essentially a political party.

The inbuilt animosity between Hasina and Khaleda precluded their cooperation even during national emergencies. The mutual distrust and animosity were so intense that in the 1980s they refused to join hands and fight against the military rule of Gen. H.M. Ershad even though both were opposed to military rule. In fact, capitalising on the situation, he managed to convince Hasina to fight the March 1986 Jatiya

Sangsad elections boycotted by the BNP. Likewise, prior to the 2001 elections and in a vain bid to weaken Khaleda, Hasina weaned Ershad away from the BNP-led coalition.³

In their bid to capture power, the secular-oriented Awami League and the right-wing BNP were not averse to enlisting the support of the Jama' at which has thus emerged as a major player in coalition building. Its strength lies in its ability to forge issue-based partnerships with diverse groups without diluting its Islamic credentials. It is not averse to making common cause with both the principal forces in Bangladesh and has capitalised the mutual antagonism and animosity between Hasina and Khaleda. In some form or the other, the Jama'at played a significant role in the formation of all the three governments since 1991. Its alliance with the Jama'at largely enabled the BNP to secure an absolute majority in 1991 and 2001. Abandoning this alliance proved costly to it in 1996 when the Awami League secured the largest number of seats in the Jatiya Sangsad. Even though BNP is seen as the natural ally of the Jama'at, the Awami League was also not averse to reaching a tactical understanding with the Islamic group. Attempts by Hasina (1996-2001), notwithstanding her secular credentials, to co-opt the Jama'at during the opposition's boycott of parliament, considerably enhanced the political acceptability of the Jama'at.

Caretaker Governments

In 1991, when the military finally opted to relinquish power to the elected leadership, a neutral non-partisan caretaker government was formed to conduct and supervise elections. This arrangement was institutionalised in 1996 following the controversial elections to the sixth Jatiya Sangsad held under the BNP government. Continued boycott by the opposition necessitated the introduction of a caretaker government.

If one examines the performance of the three caretaker governments since 1991, certain broad trends can be noticed:

- *Lack of popular confidence in elected government to conduct elections:*

Some Bangladeshi scholars have argued that this could be an ideal model for other Third World countries.⁴ The arrangement, however, underscores the deep-seated distrust among the political parties and lack of popular confidence in the ability of an elected government to hold, organise and conduct non-partisan elections

- *Accusations of partisanship of the caretaker government:*

The mutual distrust among the political parties has compelled them to support the idea of a caretaker government to hold elections. Such an arrangement is seen as a lesser evil which would minimise and preclude electoral malpractices. At the same time, the principal parties have doubted the ‘impartiality’ of the caretaker government. In 1996, Khaleda mentioned the ‘partisan’ attitude of Habibur Rahman; and, five years later Hasina adopted the same posture vis-à-vis Justice Latifur Rahman’s government. Their muted remarks turned into vocal criticism when the verdict went against them.

- *Dangers of prolongation:*

Until now, all the three caretaker governments were in office for a very short duration but prolongation of their tenure due to any unforeseen developments is likely to erode the democratisation process. Should unforeseen natural or national calamities prevent the holding of elections in future, the caretaker government could continue in office beyond the constitutionally limited three-month period.

- *Lack of accountability:*

Even though holding free elections is the prime mandate of the caretaker government, it is also responsible for the day-to-day running of the country until an elected government takes office. A body that is explicitly and exclusively created to organise elections runs the administration during this period. Some have felt that, if an elected body cannot be trusted to conduct and organise free and fair elections, an un-elected body composed of people selected by a retired judge cannot be trusted to run the administration.

- *Controversial decisions of caretaker government:*

Headed by a retired judge with a specific mandate, the caretaker government is primarily an un-elected government and any sensitive decision it might take would lack political legitimacy. Indeed, during the 2001 elections, some of the decisions taken by the administration led by Justice Latifur Rahman came under criticism from the Awami League and from neutral non-political observers as well. By reversing some of the unpopular decisions of the elected government, *Justice Latifur Rehman appears to have exceeded the constitutional propriety and usurped the powers of the elected govern-*

ment. In his enthusiasm to ‘clean-up’ the support system that feeds corruption, he cancelled some of the national and international contracts signed by the Hasina government.

Indeed, the popular distrust against political parties and accusations of partisanship of even caretaker governments underscore the failure to evolve a permanent constitutional body like the Election Commission to conduct and administer the electoral process.

Problems of Governance

The acuteness of political instability is compounded by lack of accountability of the political leadership and the absence of checks and balances. The opposition often disregards the parliament and has treated the institution as merely a forum for and by the ruling alliance. The lack of an institutional mechanism to restrict and curb authoritarian tendencies as well as to establish independence of various institutions has led to problems of governance. Even three decades after its founding, Bangladesh is yet to conceive, evolve and build strong institutions that would safeguard and guarantee the essence of democracy.

Political Irresponsibility

Despite regular and periodic elections, political legitimacy continues to evade Bangladesh. Each Jatiya Sangsad election was followed by allegations of rigging, intimidation and other forms of electoral malpractices by the party losing the polls. Instead of gracefully accepting the popular verdict that goes against them, the losers rarely concede defeat but indulge in street protests, boycott of parliament and organise prolonged *hartals*.

During Khaleda’s first government, the Awami League organised 173 days of *hartals* and the BNP retaliated with 85 days of total stoppage of public activities when Hasina was in power.⁵ These often lead to incidents of violence. Conveniently forgetting their pledges the political parties made while in office, they invariably resort to prolonged agitational politics from the opposition ranks.

The continued inability of political parties to accept the popular verdict led to international intervention. On August 2, 2001, weeks before the Jatiya Sangsad elections Hasina and Khaleda gave a public pledge to former US President Jimmy Carter that they would accept the results and the party in opposition would not boycott parliament.⁶ But soon after the elections, Hasina conveniently forgot the pledge. Accusing that the elections were rigged and manipulated, she refused to accept Khaleda’s landslide victory and opted to boycott parliament.⁷ Likewise, the

removal of special security cover to the two surviving daughters of Mujib, including Hasina, provided an excuse for breaking her pledge against *hartals*.

The parties in power have also displayed lack of maturity and political acumen. Unable to overcome past antagonisms, they tend to treat the opposition as an opponent rather than a legitimate player in a democracy. Indeed, Hasina's refusal to give adequate coverage to the opposition in the state-controlled media led to a BNP-sponsored *hartal*. Similarly, immediately after assuming office, Khaleda filed a series of corruption cases against members of the former Hasina government,⁸ banned a number of Awami League leaders from leaving the country⁹ and incarcerated a host of second rung leaders.

The prolonged trading of charges between Khaleda and Hasina has reached a new and dangerous level. In a measure reminiscent of personal vendetta of the pre-independence period, Khaleda began a process of revisionist historiography in Bangladesh. Efforts are being made to systematically erase Mujibur Rahman's role in the liberation of Bangladesh.¹⁰

The prolonged, often tiring, personalised politics between two warring families and gradual marginalisation of Ershad could pave the way for the possible emergence of the Jama'at as a potential alternative. Its strong ideological moorings, well-organised network, corruption-free image and social activism could work in favour of the Islamic party when other parties have none of these advantages and are saddled with negative stereotypes.

Executive Over-reach

The Judiciary in Bangladesh does not function independent of the Executive but is subservient to it. This lack of constitutionally guaranteed independence has haunted the country since 1971 and the Judiciary, especially at the lower levels, has functioned as an extension of the Executive. Independence exercised by the High Court and the Supreme Court is inadequate to guarantee the rights of ordinary citizens; and, many individuals cannot afford to appeal to the higher courts for remedy. The separation of powers has been promised by various political parties in the 1991, 1996 and 2001 elections but no concrete measures have been implemented.

On the eve of the 2001 elections, the caretaker government headed by Justice Latifur Rahman initiated a bureaucratic procedure for the separation of the Judiciary from the Executive and President Ahmad Shahabuddin issued an ordinance to this effect. Even as the politicians and bureaucrats opposed the move, the High Court as well as the Supreme Court of Bangladesh upheld the 12-point directive of the caretaker government. The Supreme Court set October 26, 2002 as the deadline to implement

the decisions but the day came and went without any progress. Seen in this broad context, the spate of anti-terrorism legislations enacted by the Jatiya Sangsad seriously undermine the fundamental rights of Bangladeshi citizens. Individuals could be incarcerated on suspicion and kept in custody without independent judicial safeguards.

Even the office of the President is not immune to the overpowering Executive. On June 21, 2002 the ruling BNP alliance asked Badruddozza Chowdhury to step down for not showing sufficient 'deference' to the BNP founder Gen. Ziaur Rahman.¹¹ Khaleda wants Bangladesh to recognise her late husband and not Mujibur Rahman as 'declarer of Bangladeshi independence' and his omission to do so led to his unceremonious removal.¹²

The absence of strong institutional checks and balances in an atmosphere vitiated by personalised politics weakens the democratic process.

Islamisation and Dangers of Extremism

Change of Identity

At the time of partition of the Indian Union, the Muslims of Bengal identified themselves with the Muslim League, leading to the formation of East Pakistan. Pakistan as the homeland of the Muslims of the subcontinent further consolidated the religious identity and submerged the Bengali cultural identity.

Indeed, the emergence of Urdu as the national language of Pakistan further undermined the Bengali linguistic identity.¹³ In other words, religion became the primordial identity and the Islamic identity came to differentiate the East Pakistanis from the Bengalis of West Bengal, although there was an anti-Urdu movement for retention of their cultural identity.

The civil war in Pakistan was the result of the disappointment of the people of East Pakistan with Western Pakistan. Islam alone was unable to explain and sustain the politico-economic exploitation of the East. Daniel Pipes went on to argue that though becoming part of Pakistan, "Bengali nationalism was stronger than territorial feelings in West Pakistan; thus, as the Bengalis became disillusioned with the notion of Pakistan, they rebelled against an Islamic ideal and affirmed their own national identity."¹⁴ This had begun to take root in the early 1950s. The revival of the Bengali cultural identity was essential to differentiate East from West Pakistan and this time 'Eastern Bengalis' rebelled against the 'Western Punjabis'.

This revival however, was short-lived. Having realised the secession from West Pakistan in 1971, Bengali nationalism lost its relevance. The dividing line once again moved back to religion. Now, Bangladesh has to differentiate itself from

West Bengal and not West Pakistan. Therefore, despite his secular moorings and commitments, shortly after taking office as president of the newly formed Bangladesh, Mujibur Rahman began to embrace Islamic symbolism and, once again, Islam emerged as the primary national identity.

Since Mujib's assassination in 1975, frequent military interventions strengthened, furthered and consolidated the political stronghold of the religious forces. Gen. Ziaur Rahman, who took over in 1977, needed political legitimacy and Islam turned out to be his support base. Despite not being overtly religious, he rekindled latent Islamic undercurrents and his political outfit, the BNP, gradually relegated Bengali cultural identity and promoted Islam as the primary national identity. His successor, Gen. H.M. Ershad, went a step further and declared that Islam would enable Bangladesh "to live as a nation with a distinct identity."¹⁵

Rise of Jama'at

By the time the first free multi-party elections were held in 1991, the Islamisation process and the religion-politics linkage were firmly in place and most political parties, including the secularly-inclined Awami League, were reconciled to the Islamic indoctrination of Bangladesh. During the election campaign, although military rule was the prime concern, parties found it judicious and politically rewarding to champion Islamic issues. This trend continued since then and has led to the rehabilitation of the Jama'at in Bangladeshi politics. Its erstwhile opposition to the liberation of East Pakistan in 1971 became less of a political liability among the masses. Furthermore, the dependence of military rulers on religious elements for legitimacy made Jama'at a kosher in the Bangladeshi political scene.

As a result, the secular-oriented Awami League and the right-wing BNP were not averse to enlisting the support of Jama'at and the party has emerged as a major player in coalition-building. Its strength lies in its ability to forge issue-based partnerships with diverse groups while retaining its Islamic credentials. It is not averse to making common cause with both the principal forces in Bangladesh and capitalised on the mutual antagonism and animosity between Hasina and Khaleda.

In some form or another, the Jama'at played a significant role in the formation of all the three governments since 1991. The alliance with Jama'at largely enabled the BNP to secure an absolute majority in 1991 and 2001. Abandoning of this alliance proved costly in 1996 when the Awami League secured the largest number of seats in the Jatiya Sangsad. Even though the BNP is seen as the natural ally of the Jama'at, the Awami League was not averse to forging a tactical understanding with the Islamic group. Attempts by Hasina, with her secular credentials, to co-opt Jama'at during

the opposition boycott of parliament considerably enhanced the political acceptability of the Jama'at, although its strength lies in its cadres and not popular support.

The growing Islamic fervour in Bangladesh and growth of the Jama'at manifested themselves in far reaching changes that are taking place in the country. Despite its avowed commitment to secularism, the Awami League has adopted a number of overtly religious positions to win over mainstream voters. During the 2001 Jatiya Sangsad elections, its manifesto promised not to enact any legislation contrary to the Quran and pledged to establish a shariah bench at the Supreme Court. The Jama'at, which fought the election as an ally of the BNP, sought to regulate and institutionalise 'mosque-based education.' Other parties have also adopted an overtly-religious position in their manifestoes.

Growth of Extremism

Growing religious extremism in various parts of the world also has its resonance in Bangladesh and this process could threaten its domestic stability. As a number of recent developments and incidents suggest, it could feed socio-political tensions and other developments. These include the following:-

- The close linkage between Al Qaida and various Islamic movements in Bangladesh has been widely recognised. The February 23, 1998 'Declaration of Jihad against Jews and Crusaders' by Osama bin-Laden was also signed by Fazlul Rahman, the head of the Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami (HUJI) of Bangladesh.¹⁶ Since then HUJI has emerged as the linchpin of Al Qaida operations in Bangladesh and has been commented upon by various neutral and international observers.¹⁷
- The cancellation of President Bill Clinton's visit outside Dhaka during his state visit in 2000 was attributed to 'security threats' emanating from Islamic extremists. Since then both Hasina and Khaleda have used this incident politically. While Hasina called for vigilance against Taliban activities in Bangladesh¹⁸, Khaleda sees it as an Awami League ploy against the ruling coalition.
- There is palpable radicalisation of society that has contributed to popularisation of extremism and the post-September 11 anti-American rhetoric and street protests amplify the linkage. For example, in December 2001, a leading cleric, Maulana Ubaidul Haq told his faithfuls: "President Bush and America is the more heinous terrorist in the world (sic). Both America and Bush must be destroyed. The Americans will be washed away if Bangladesh's 120 million Muslims spit on them."¹⁹ Though currently

marginal, this has to be seen in the context of the increasing spread of madrassa-based education. With over 64,000 madrassas spread across the country, religious education has significantly supplanted the state-supported education system, especially in the rural areas.

- Rohingyas, the Muslim minorities who fled Myanmar due to repression by the military junta, took refuge in Chittagong and Cox Bazaar where the Jama'at is very active. Jama'at has used arms and ammunition available with the Rohingyas to conduct their campaign against political rivals. This has led to large-scale violence and lawlessness which have become more pronounced following the October 2001 elections.²⁰ American journalist Alex Perry alleges: "... southern Bangladesh has become a haven for hundreds of jihadis in the land. They find natural allies in Muslim guerrillas from India hiding across the border, and in Muslim Rohingyas, tens of thousands of whom fled the ethnic and religious suppression of the Burmese military junta in the late 1970s and 80s."²¹
- In March 2002 Osama bin Laden's Egyptian deputy, Ayman Muhammad Rab'i al-Zawahiri (who was tried for and acquitted of the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat) used the Chittagong port and temporarily located himself in Dhaka before moving out of Bangladesh.²²
- In May 2002 nine groups, including the HUJI,²³ joined hands to form the 'Bangladeshi Islamic Manch' (Bangladesh Islamic Association) which is an umbrella outfit comprising various Islamic militant groups operating in Bangladesh as well as India and Myanmar.²⁴
- In June 2002 media reports in India suggested the possible infiltration of the ISI through Al Qaida operatives in Bangladesh.²⁵
- In July 2002, about 150 members belonging to Al Qaida and Harkat-ul-Jihad-el-Islami were ferried into the Chittagong port through fishing boats and one such vessel was identified as *M V Mecca*.²⁶
- On September 24, 2002, Bangladeshi authorities arrested seven Arab nationals—four Yemenis, one Algerian, one Libyan and one Sudanese—on charges of providing militant arms and training in madrassas in Dhaka funded by the Saudi-based charity agency, Al-Haramain.²⁷

These developments indicate, that under extremist pressures, religious pre-eminence might lead to domestic turmoil, especially when the main political parties differ over the growth of religious extremism and its consequences.

Weakening Social Cohesion

Growing domestic violence has emerged as a major challenge to the Bangladesh government. The prolonged nexus between politicians belonging to the Awami League and the BNP with criminal elements, rampant flow of small arms and criminalisation of university campuses have led to severe law and order problems. Restoration of peace in the streets dominated the 2001 election campaign with the BNP calling for district level special courts to deal “with heinous crimes like repression of women, abduction, acid burning, extortion and the like.” The IJOFF went a step further and promised to rid Bangladesh of terrorism within three months if it was voted to power. On the eve of the 2001 elections, the value of illegal arms in the country was estimated at a quarter of a million rupees.²⁸

The failure of the BNP which came to power pledging to fight, curb and eliminate domestic violence has come under severe criticism. The media in Bangladesh have been periodically highlighting the deteriorating law and order situation in the country and the failure of the state to curb the menace.²⁹ For example, an editorial in the *Daily Star*, argues:

If one takes a look at the nature of crime and violence taking place one finds that: (a) the ruling party is riddled with factions mostly at the JCD (Jaityabadi Chatra Dal, the student wing of the BNP) levels; (b) the emphasis is on harbouring elements who can be put to use by factional leaders against each other on short notice; and (c) overall, there is a manifest arrogance of power among the young party activists which we have repeatedly entreated with the government to contain or else face a further credibility downslide.³⁰

As with other issues, the efforts to combat violence and intimidation are entangled in intra-party feuds. Despite her past opposition, on coming to power, Khaleda invoked the Public Safety Act (PSA). It was applied against her Awami League opponents.³¹ This was a modified version of the Law and Order Disruption Crimes (Speedy Trial) Act enacted in April 2001.³² Complaining that the PSA is inadequate to deal with terrorism and other forms of violence in April 2002, Khaleda annulled the Act and introduced ‘Ain Srinkhala Bhangakari Oporadh’ (Summary Trial) Act, 2002,³³ which enables the government to try crimes pertaining to murder, rape, possession of illegal arms, narcotics, explosives and hoarding.

Of late, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) as well as Dhaka University have emerged as major troublespots for the authorities with rival student factions indulging in exchange of fire, leading to prolonged closure of the institutions. As a result, in September 2002, BUET had banned student politics

to restrict usage of weapons in campuses. The criminalisation of politics and the nexus between politicians and criminal elements and the resultant violence have exposed the inefficiency of the civilian government machinery to provide security to the ordinary citizens. In October 2002, the army was called in for the first time for anti-crime operations code-named *Operation Clean Heart*.

Use of the army for civilian operations, especially its fight against growing domestic violence, ushers in a new phase in Bangladeshi politics. At one level, it is an admission of failure of the civilian administration to provide basic security to the citizens. At another level, this opens up the Pandora's Box. The practice opens the possibility of the army being used for political purposes and to contain the critics of the government. The blurring of jurisdiction might lead to military intervention in politics and reverse the limited progress made since 1991.

The Minority Question

It appears that the re-emergence of Islamic identity intensified the communal divide in Bangladesh. If the Bengali cultural identity excluded the non-Bengali Chakmas, the Islamic identity excluded the Chakmas as well as Hindus and Buddhists.³⁴ Since the early days, Bangladesh has followed a policy detrimental to the minorities; most visible is the case of the Chakmas. Notwithstanding the December 1997 agreement, the Chakma problem still persists and Chakma leader Larma has threatened to re-launch the agitation against the government's failure to implement the accord.

Contrary to popular perceptions, even anti-Hindu violence³⁵ was not always linked to communal tensions in India such as the Babri Masjid demolition but is also an outcome of internal dynamics. Ascendancy of the Islamic identity and the corresponding dilution of secularism and Bengali cultural identity have worked against the practice of tolerance and accommodation. Bangladeshi scholar, Meghna Guhathakurta aptly sums up the plight of the minorities in her country:

Although technically speaking, there is nothing to prevent minorities to participate in mainstream politics in Bangladesh and hence bring in their own kinship structures into play, the foregrounding of a majoritarianism inscribing Bengali as a state language and Islam as a state religion automatically marginalises religious and ethnic minorities from attaining a central role in determining class hegemony.³⁶

The political landscape underscores the plight of the minorities. The number of minority MPs in the Jatiya Sangsad for example, diminished from 14 in 1996 to four in 2001.

The official response to post-election violence against the Hindus is a clear signal of potential troubles in future. Not only was the government lax in its efforts to control and contain but it also adopted a hostile posture to any criticism over its handling. Instead of acting against the perpetrators of such attacks, the government was quick to incarcerate human rights activists, such as Shariar Kabir, for their 'anti-national' activities. Unlike the 1992 violence sparked off by the Babri Masjid demolition, the recent spate of violence is rooted in intra-party disputes over the 'political loyalty' of the minorities. Popular perceptions of minorities being staunch supporters of the Awami League worked against the Bangladeshi Hindus and have earned the wrath of the BNP and its allies. The violence, in turn, has drawn widespread Indian and international attention and brought the minority policy of the country under greater scrutiny.³⁷

Conclusion

Compared to many Third World countries, Bangladesh has remained relatively stable and peaceful; and, escaped major internal upheavals. Seen in a larger context, the fifteen-year military rule appears to be an exception arising out of the peculiar circumstances and authoritarian tendencies of the rulers. While the democratic transition in 1991 was slow and painful, democratic change of governments has become the norm. Leaders are changed through ballots and not bullets; and, power oscillates between the two principal parties.

Despite these processes, Bangladesh is in the midst of a host of internal crises which could potentially undermine long-term national stability. Elections have not replaced the traditional extra-parliamentary protests which often turn violent. Popular verdicts are still not gracefully accepted and the opposition is pre-occupied with the single task of ousting the elected government. The frequent boycotting of parliament challenges the democratic credentials of the political leaders. Cumulatively, street protests, violent anti-government demonstrations, *hartals* and boycott of parliament raise questions about Bangladesh's ability to gain international respect and financial assistance.

The introduction of caretaker governments to oversee the electoral process is also not without its share of problems. Though noble, it arises from lack of public trust in the government to organise elections. The lack of clarity over the division of responsibilities is causing concerns over the independence of the Judiciary, especially when the Executive (mainly the Prime Minister) is showing signs of following undemocratic practices.

Pre-occupied with personal animosities and rivalries, the government of the day is unable to address basic issues such as protection of life and property of ordinary

citizens. The introduction of special courts, tough legislations and military assistance could only partly remedy the situation. The consolidation of democracy along with checks and balances, greater accommodation and tolerance of political differences, are essential if Bangladesh were to avoid the return of military rule.

Acknowledgement

The author thanks the two anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions on the paper.

References/End Notes

1. Between 1973 and 2001 Bangladesh held eight Jatiya Sangsad elections, three Presidential elections and three Referendums., of which three Jatiya Sangsad elections of 1979, 1986, 1988, two presidential elections of 1978, 1981 and two referendums of 1977 and 1985 were held the under military regime.
2. Ershad however, retains considerable influence in his home district of Rangpur. Jatiya Party was split in 1998 in two factions one is led by Ershad another by the Mizan Manju faction.
3. Not only did this strategy prove unsuccessful, a few months after the elections Ershad admitted that his alliance with Hasina was a 'mistake', and is now concentrating on patching up the differences with the present regime.
4. Hakim, Muhammad A., Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh Under Neutral Caretaker Governments: A Lesson for Massive Rigging-prone Countries? *Asian Thought and Society*. January-April 2000, **25** (73) 47-65.
5. Shehabuddin, Elora, Bangladesh in 1998. *Asian Survey*. January-February 1999, **39** (1) 151; Mozaffar Islam, Parliamentary elections in Bangladesh. *The Sentinel* (Guwahati) August 26, 2001.
6. Hye, Hasnat Abdul, In My View: After the Thaw. *Daily Star*. August 10, 2001.
7. On October 3, less than 48 hours after the elections, the Awami League decided against joining the parliament. However, to preclude their disqualification from membership, on October 24, Hasina and other members of the Awami League took oath as MPs but subsequently renewed their boycott.
8. On January 23, 2002, the BNP-government released a White Paper on graft, irregularity and abuse of power allegedly committed by the Hasina government during 1996-2001. A number of former senior ministers such as Mohammad Nasim, Amir Hossain Amu, Shah AMS Kibria, ASHK Sadique, Anwar Hossain Manju, Abdur Razzak, Rafiqul Islam, Mosharraf Hossain, Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir and Moulana Nurul Islam were charged with graft and irregularities. Moreover, numerous government officials as well as different local and international private organisations were also implicated in the White Paper. White Paper Released: Hasina, Most Ex-ministers Linked to 40 Cases of Graft. *Daily Star*. January 24, 2002
9. On October 24, 2001, passports of former ministers Tofael Ahmed and Mohammad Nasim were impounded. Editorial, High handed impounding of passports Government action smacks of vindictiveness. *Daily Star*. October 26, 2001.

10. Moreover, Khaleda removed the official order that demanding that *Bangabandhu* Mujibur Rahman's photo be displayed in government offices. She replaced this with a demand to display Gen Ziaur Rahman's along with Mujibur. In 2002 the government cancelled August 15, the day of Mujib's assassination, as national day of mourning. In February 2002, Hasina charged that the government has spent over TK 3 billion for rewriting text-books on the history of Bangladesh. There are Taliban in government, Hasina reiterates accusation. *The Independent*. February 6, 2002.
11. Challenges for the New President: BNP Appears to Recognise the Need for a Neutral Head of State. *The Independent*. September 7, 2002.
12. Dr Iajuddin Takes Oath as President Today. *The Independent*. September 6, 2002.
13. Feldman, Herbert, *The End and the Beginning: Pakistan 1969-71*. 1975. Oxford University Press; London p. 39-42
14. Pipes, Daniel, *In the Path of God Islam and Political Power*. 1983. Basic Books Inc; New York. p. 207.
15. Kamaluddin, S., *The Islamic Way: Ershad's Religious Amendment Steals Zealots' Thunder*. *Far Eastern Economic Review*. June 23, 1988.
16. For the complete text of the declaration see, Yonah Alexander and Michael S Swetnam, *Usama bin Laden's al-Qaida: Profile of a Terrorist Network*. 2001. Aditya Books; New Delhi. Appendix 1B, 1-3.
17. Gunaratna, Rohan, *Inside Al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*. 2002. Roli Books; New Delhi. pp.219-20. See also, Bertil Lintner, *Is Religious Extremism on the Rise in Bangladesh?* *Jane's Intelligence Review*. May 2002, **14** (5) 11; Alex Perry, *Deadly Cargo*. *Time*. October 15, 2002.
18. Continuing the same stand from the opposition ranks, in February 2002, Hasina told the media: "I repeat my claim that there are Taliban, who want to wage an Afghan style war in the country to turn Bangladesh into another Afghanistan..." There are Taliban in government, Hasina reiterates accusation. no. 9.
19. Cited in Bertil Lintner, no.18, p.11.
20. Jama'at-Shibir Clique Hires Rohingya Terrorists for Election Work. *Dainik Janakantha* (Dhaka). August 18, 2001. In FBIS-NES-2001-0821, August 18, 2001, (electronic version).
21. Perry, Alex, no.18.
22. Ibid.
23. Azizul Haq, Leader of the Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ) currently a partner of the ruling coalition, is a member of the HUJI advisory council.
24. Lintner, Bertil, *Championing Islamist Extremism*. *South Asia Intelligence Review*. September 16, 2002, **1** (9).
25. A senior Indian official was quoted as saying: "Al Qaida and Al-e-Hadish (a front organisation of the Lashkar-e-Toiba) guerrillas based in the border districts of Lamonirhat, Kurigram, Rangpur, Dinapur and Bhola in Bangladesh are planning to infiltrate into the state (that is West Bengal). The terrorists based in several camps in these districts are lying in wait to sneak into the state to carryout series of killings and sabotage. The net plans to sneak into India with active help of Bangladesh Rifles." Probir Pramanik, *Alarm spreads to border*. *The Telegraph*. June 12, 2002.
26. Perry, Alex, no. 18.

27. Ibid.
28. Schoolteacher slain: Need for Mopping up Arms Stressed. *Daily Star*. October 28, 2002.
29. Law and Order in Dire Strait: Looking for Scapegoat Gets Nowhere. *Daily Star*. September 18, 2002; See also, Lynching and Law. *The Independent*. September 22, 2002; A.K. Fuzlul Haq, Who shall listen to the 'fariyaad' of the citizenry? *The Independent*. August 20, 2002.
30. Law and Order in Dire Strait, no. 29
31. Apprehensive of its misuse by Hasina against BNP, in February 2000, Khaleda opposed the enactment of the PSA.
32. Ashraf, Nazul, NewLaw for Speedy Trial of Six Major Offences. *Daily Star*. October 25, 2002.
33. Adopted by Jatiya Sangsad on October 24, 2002, this Act covers a wide range of violence including "terrorism, mugging, kidnapping, illegal toll collection, vandalism, obstruction to tender, and obstruction to works of government officers and employees and their relatives, hindrance to normal traffic movements and trespassing." Zayadul Ahsan, PSA Scrapped, Another Harsh Law Proposed. *Daily Star*. April 02, 2002.
34. While the Bengali Hindus who opted to stay behind after partition of the subcontinent draw much attention, Bangladesh also has tribal population who have distinct ethnic and religious identities. Bengali Hindus constitute much of the minority population in Bangladesh and according to the 1991 Census, about 10.5 per cent of the total population belongs to this group. In the same year the Chakma population stood at 623,000, representing just under 0.59 per cent of the national population. However, Chakmas constitute the majority in the CHT, their traditional homeland and according to the 1991 Census, the CHT population stood at 974,445 out of which they constitute 51.43 per cent. See http://www.sdndb.org/sdi/international_day/indigenous-people/chittagong-hill-tracts.htm downloaded on March 7, 2002.
35. For a recent discussion see, author's Post-election Communal Violence in Bangladesh. *Strategic Analysis*. April-June 2002, **26** (2) 316-21.
36. Guhathakurta, Meghna, Assault on minorities in Bangladesh: An Analysis at <http://www.meghbarta.net/2002/january/minor.html#minor1>
37. Two international conferences on 'Minority Cleansing' were held in Dhaka in April and October 2002. Given the minority focus, neither was complementing Bangladeshi policy vis-à-vis minorities.

Sreeradha Datta is Associate Fellow at IDSA. She specialises in political and security issues of South Asia.