

WHAT STRATEGY FOR NORMALISING POLITICS IN BANGLADESH: TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION OR TOTAL VICTORY?

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PART2 (continued from last issue)

"No sign of their rehabilitation: Evicted sex workers move freely in city"

This refers to the recent eviction of sex workers, primarily from brothels in Narayanganj. It was reported that in Dhaka city, recently the number of street and floating prostitutes increased significantly. Although the government of Bangladesh talked about rehabilitating the evicted prostitutes, but according to the report, very few of them have experienced any form of help from the authorities, except several human rights organisations providing help to a few. It was pointed out that the incomes made by the prostitutes are very low, and that they are also exploited by the police. 'Premises of many offices, markets as well as underground parking lots, parks, streets and alleys in the metropolis turn makeshift brothels during night... As the parks and streets are restricted for prostitutes, some dishonest police personnel take this as advantage... During a visit late in the night last week, this correspondent found some policemen on the island of south-east corner of Purana Paltan turn and "High Court" as well as in front of the "Jatiya Press Club" having sex with prostitutes. Many security guards of Azad Products building and Employment Bank at Purana Paltan, "Kulsum" (a real estate housing building) at Shantinagar, Mouchak market, Bishal centre at Bara Moghbazar, Public Health and Nutrition Institute at Mohakhali were also seen doing the same' (The Financial Express). Clearly, the eviction, although might have released some lands for shopping or other commercial developments in Narayanganj, was not thought through properly, including analysing possible detrimental consequences and developing contingency plans to deal with them. The result has been a displacement of prostitutes from one area to another area, creating social social consequences elsewhere.

"Ahad Chowdhury says: BNP trying to legitimise anti-liberation forces"

This relates to the attempt to consolidate the recently formed BNP-led alliance between the BNP, Jatiya Party, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote to launch a one point movement to unseat the Awami League government from power. It was reported that the Chairman of the Muktijoddha Sangsad, Abdul Ahad Chowdhury, considered this alliance as a lust for power attempt by the BNP, and thought that there was no logic for the BNP to join in an alliance with Jamaat, a party belonging to the 'anti-liberation forces', and demanded a 'trial of Ghulam Azam and other Jamaatis as war criminals'. He also suggested that all freedom fighters in BNP should join the campaign to bring 'war criminals' to trial. Mr Chowdhury said that the this alliance represented a process of rehabilitating those who were actively involved in preventing the liberation of Bangladesh, and said that "no freedom fighter

should accept the process of legitimising the anti-liberation forces" (The Independent). This report, however, did not say anything regarding the earlier alliance of the Awami League with Jamaat-e-Islam and the Jatiya Party to unseat the previous BNP government - what the view of the Muktijoddha Sangsad or Mr Chowdhury was - in terms of whether that process also helped to rehabilitate Jamaat-e-Islam.

The purpose of choosing and discussing the

the rape of thousands of women by Pakistani soldiers during the war and the killing of prominent intellectuals. Sheikh Mujib and Awami League are blamed for betraying the spirit of the liberation and monopolising Bangladeshi politics after the liberation in a totalitarian fashion; being responsible for extreme disorder and near anarchy; Rakhi Bahini repression and killing of thousands of opponents, the great 1974 famine that killed hundreds of thousands of poor people; and destroying democracy

Commentators, politicians and foreign diplomats often lament at the endless politics of conflict in Bangladesh and express their inability to understand why, in a country that has no significant ethnic, linguistic, or religious divide, there exists such a divisive and destructive political process. It is suggested that as there is no real reason for this ruinous political cycle in Bangladesh, politicians should realise this and change the way that they practice politics for the greater good of the country. Therefore, political parties, politicians and their supporters should shun their destructive politics and start being tolerant towards each other and constructive in politics to solve the urgent problems of the country.

above four reports was to help illustrate the nature of the problems that Bangladesh faces. First, it was shown that the political process is riddled with corruption, and an insight was provided into one of the reasons why our politicians are not able to take decisive actions based on long term perspectives and analyses of the problems faced by Bangladesh. In order to survive in the short run, they make use of illegitimate means and then pay a heavy price themselves due to their dependency on corrupt people and muscle power, and ultimately causes the country to pay a heavy price too. Second, an explanation was provided to show why without political stability and normal politics in Bangladesh the country would not generate the necessary indigenous economic growth and attract the necessary foreign investment to deal with some of the urgent economic problems faced. Third, it was pointed out how decisive actions undertaken by politicians, without first analysing their possible long term consequences, rather than finding solutions, they in fact end up creating greater problems. The fourth report was to introduce one of the latest element of the developing politics of conflict in Bangladesh before going on to look at it in more details. Some issues relating to the liberation of Bangladesh - what was its purpose; who opposed it and who fought for it; how should it be interpreted and what should current and future generations know and believe; whether some of the developments in post-liberation Bangladesh were deviations from the spirit of the liberation - are the main points of disagreement that divide the various political parties in Bangladesh.

Jamaat-e-Islami is blamed for being an anti-liberation party, and accused of part responsibility for

by the creation of BAKSAL and the banning of most newspapers and political parties. BNP is blamed for being the main beneficiary of the August 1975 assassination of Sheikh Mujib. General Ziaur Rahman is blamed for being part of the conspiracy behind Mujib's killing, the rehabilitation of the 'anti-liberation forces', and legitimising military rule in Bangladesh. He has also been accused of creating confusion regarding the identity of the people of Bangladesh. It is said that after the liberation we knew who we were - we were Bengalis - but Ziaur Rahman, with the help of the anti-liberation forces, by defining us as Bangladeshis as opposed to Bengalis, created confusion and now many people in Bangladesh are not sure about their cultural and ethnic identity.

The political process in Bangladesh has become a zero sum game, where the winner takes all - of course history has shown that this can only be done temporarily. When Pakistan was created in 1947 an attempt was made by certain representatives of the Muslim League to monopolise power, who thought that they were given the mandate to create a Pakistan according to their own particular wishes, ignoring the wishes of others that had different visions. It soon became clear that although the vast majority of the people supported the creation of Pakistan, they all did not do so for the same reason. This explains why soon after the creation of Pakistan, conflicts developed between different factions about what kind of Pakistan one should have. Similarly, in the struggle for Bangladesh, the vast majority of the people supported the liberation war and the creation of a new country. The conflict that developed soon after-ward means that not all the people of Bangladesh supported the creation of the country for the same reason. This means that if the Awami League thinks that because they provided the leadership under Sheikh Mujib that created Bangladesh they have the mandate to create a country according to their particular ideological visions, then they would be making a similar mistake as did the rulers of Pakistan.

It is rather clear that, for a long time, the aim of a political party in Bangladesh has been to achieve total victory and shape everything according to its ideological vision and interpretations of history, and not leave any room for others to also make positive and constructive contributions from their ideological and political positions for the greater good of the country. The end result is that the political party in power tries to monopolise everything and prevent the opposition from playing a constructive role, with the help of propaganda, state machinery, the police force and the intelligent service, repression, sympathetic media and selective interpretations of history, while the opposition tries to bring the government down by disrupting the rule of the ruling party by hartals, non-cooperation, parliamentary and election boycotts, propaganda, selective interpretations of history, and with the help of temporary king-makers, such as Jamaat-e-Islami and the Jatiya Party. The outcome is a never ending and an unhealthy destructive political cycle.

First, when you ask the Jamaatis why their party actively supported the Pakistani army during the Bangladesh liberation war, killing prominent intellectuals, and helping the army to rape thousands of women, they say that with regard supporting the Pakistani army they thought that they had two choice - either to become slaves of Delhi or Slaves of Islamabad, and they chose to be the slaves of the latter. Sadly, their calculation did not include the choice made by the vast majority of the people of Bangladesh, that is, not to be slaves

of anybody, but to become a free and an independent people. With regard to killing of intellectuals and helping and facilitating the rape of women by the Pakistani army, they say that this is a propaganda, invented by the Awami League and the secularists to undermine their party and Islam in Bangladesh, and that there is no shred of truth in this accusation. Second, when you ask the Awamis about the post-independent chaos, destruction of democracy by Sheikh Mujib who attempted to establish a totalitarian dictatorship with one party rule, they say that Bangladesh, as a result of suffering from nine months war and the destruction that it caused, the need to rehabilitate millions of refugees returning, the deteriorating law and order situation, etc., meant that task faced by the Mujib government was too gigantic and needed time for a solution. When Sheikh Hasina was confronted by the author of this article after her speech at the London School of Economics in October 1997 during the question time on the same accusation, she replied that the newspapers were banned because they were spreading false information particularly about the 1974 famine, that BAKSAL was created as a forum to enable smaller parties to have a voice in the political process of the country at a time when there was no real opposition - no BNP - and that Awami League was the only big party. Sheikh Hasina blamed the 1974 famine on the world economic upheaval that resulted from the oil price rise in the 1973, rather than on Sheikh Mujib who was the ruler of Bangladesh then. Third, when the BNP is asked about General Zia changing the constitution, distorting the history of the Liberation war in collaboration with the rehabilitated anti-liberation forces, and killing soldiers and legitimising military rule, they say that as a result of Mujib's mismanagement of the country and its economy, Bangladesh was in a dire situation. It was Zia who provided the leadership and brought the country back from the brink of disaster and gave hope back to the people suffering from total hopelessness by stabilising the country, making economic progress and creating the ideology of Bangladeshi Nationalism, which is more suited for the people of Bangladesh. Zia was a freedom fighter, who worked hard to unite the faction ridden country. A united future necessitated allowing those who opposed the liberation of Bangladesh to be rehabilitated to live a normal life. They reject the accusation that he distorted the history of the Liberation war and the post liberation period. Rather, he was said to have provided a greater balance, because the people of Bangladesh needed to know about the glorious liberation war as well the betrayal of the spirit of the liberation by Sheikh Mujib and the post independent Awami League rule.

From the above, clearly, how the supporters and members of each party interpret the liberation war and post independent developments are very different from what they are accused of doing by their opponents. It is also true that very high passions and emotions are involved, and the experiences of post-independent politics have shown that unless a dialogue takes place between the different political groups no long term solution can be achieved by bringing the destructive political cycle to an end. If a strategy of total victory, which has been tried many times, has failed to work and seems to have brought about the destructive cycle, then should not this way of doing politics be abandoned, and a better one be found that would be based on a deep understanding of the causes of the destructive political cycle. The new process would be based on a starting point, according to which, no accusations and historical interpretations of any political party can be one hundred per cent true, but that all have some truth contents and some falsehoods. This means that political programmes should not be based on who did what and justified by the interpretations of history, rather, justified on their ability to solve urgent needs and problems faced by our society. Before that would be possible a process of truth and reconciliation is needed. However, as our society do not have a person of Bishop Desmond Tutu's moral stature, there seems to be no individuals who could facilitate such a process as most of the well-known personalities are tainted by partisan politics. This means that we are back to square one - a process that is necessary for normalising politics is probably not possible to initiate in Bangladesh at the moment. This means that the destructive cycle of politics is bound to continue and push our society ever more backwards relative to the forward march of humanity.

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