

Consolidating Bangladesh

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The Bangladesh opposition's reaction to the Indian \$ one billion credit line (Dhaka, August 07) and Indian Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee's brief visit to Dhaka for the signing occasion revealed the visceral anti-Indianism that remains even today among a significant section of people in Bangladesh led by the BNP and the Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI) and their affiliates.

The twenty year credit extendable by another five years for specific important infrastructure projects comes with an interest rate of 1.7 percent. This rate is lower than even that of the international financial institutions including the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It is the largest credit line India has given to any country. Not written in the agreement, however, is the possibility that New Delhi could write off part of the credit if Dhaka found it difficult to repay with interest. This is a political decision resting with New Delhi, but would depend upon bilateral relations. On the other hand, if the BNP-JEI opposition returned to power in Bangladesh they could annul this agreement.

This leads to the question as to why the BNP-JEI alliance is willing to see their country suffer underdevelopment than work with a friendly, large neighbor much more developed, and capable and willing to assist? Briefly, the answer is complex and lies in the history of partition of the subcontinent, and liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. All these decades one was witness to Muslim-Hindu divide, fight for secularism by the liberal and intellectual sections, and cultural and linguistic divide between Pakistan (West Pakistan) and Bengalis of Bangladesh (East Pakistan).

It is difficult to unravel in a sentence or a paragraph the issues, conflicts, revenge and emotions involved from 1947 till now, and with no end in sight. The cumulative result is, however, here to see. The language movement of 1952 (precursor to the liberation war), liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 when, India was forced into a role to end Pakistan army's pogrom against Bengalis,

assassination of Prime Minister and founder of Bangladesh Sk. Mujibur Rehman in 1975, and overturn of the country's secular constitution of 1972 by the 5th amendment influenced by Gen. and President Zia-ur-Raheman, late husband of Begum Khaleda Zia.

While there is no question of today's JEI leaders having collaborated with the Pak army to exterminate Bengalee sympathetic to independence, history will have to dig deep to find out the truth about some Bengalee officers who joined the liberation force, the Mukti Bahini, against the Pak army. Topping the question list is why Zia-ur-Reheman, a Sector Commander of the Mukti Bahini, whose questionable claim to first announcing the independence of Bangladesh, turn pro-Pakistan including opening the gate to political rehabilitation of the JEI, the perpetrators of horrendous crimes against humanity in 1971.

The BNP-JEI led four party alliance which ruled Bangladesh from 2001-2006 under Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, may go down in history as the darkest period of Bangladesh. Under Prime Minister Khaleda Zia with the JEI manipulating in the background, Bangladesh came close to be designated as a terrorist state. Pakistan and its intelligence agency the ISI, was given a free run of the country. Three attempts were made on Sk. Hasina's life and the sponsors were allegedly acting on ISI's advice. The HUJI, which is sponsored by the ISI was involved along with a BNP Minister in the first attack. The third attack in 2004 which almost killed Sk. Hasina also directly involved serving BNP Ministers.

Sk. Hasina is the main living symbol of the liberation war, being the daughter of Sk. Mujibur Rehman, and also the break up of Pakistan in which the Pak army suffered a humiliating defeat. The Pakistani military establishment has never forgiven the Sk. Mujibur family for that, until Sk. Hasina is removed from the scene. In Sk. Hasina they also sense of revival of the old Bangladesh-India closeness of 1971-75 period. Therefore, the fact that Sk. Hasina's life is under pervasive threat needs no emphasis. Under Khaleda Zia's leadership, the Bangladeshi agencies and the JEI not only brought in the ISI, but the ISI brought with them the most sought after international criminal Dawood Ibrahim. Dawood lives in Karachi under the protection of the ISI and fronts its dirty work in many cases. Khalida Zia's elder son, Tareque Reheman, hobnobbed with Dawood, the ISI, along with Bangladeshi politicians like JEI Amir, Matiur Reheman Nizami, to wage terrorist war against India at the behest of the Pak army and ISI. The details have been meticulously recorded by the liberal Bangladesh media. Recently, Nizami and two other top leaders who are under arrest on multiple charges, confessed that they funded terrorist organizations especially the outlawed Jamaatul Mujahidin

Bangladesh (JMB) to create chaotic conditions in the country to scuttle the war criminals trial.

As Prime Minister from January 2009, Sk. Hasina's immediate priorities included eradication of terrorism from Bangladesh, and extend cooperation to the region to root out this scourge. She has scored significant success. But she has a long battle ahead. The Pakistani agencies are not going to relent. They do not want to lose Bangladesh as a terrorist launching pad against India, and they have their friends in Bangladesh dedicated to this cause. There are basically two major forces working in Bangladesh. One is the force led by Sk. Hasina and her progressive political partners who are focussed on development and stability. The other is the one led by the BNP and JEI determined to work at Pakistan's behest against India, and establish a surrogate relationship with Pakistan at the state level, at whatever the cost to the country.

It is, therefore, no surprise to hear Khaleda Zia describe the Indian credit line as "suicidal" and her combine of JEI and others describing access to India to transport Indian goods through Bangladesh to its north east states as threatening the security of Bangladesh. The BNP-JEI combine appear most worried with the growing India-Bangladesh relations, as this one cooperation has the potential to expand to include other countries of the sub region for mutual beneficial cooperation. Along with India, Nepal and Bhutan will have access to Bangladesh ports through Indian territory. There will also be trade routes for mutual trade and development. The most important would be power inputs from Nepal and Bhutan to Bangladesh's power starved infrastructure. In conjunction, the connectivity could extend through Myanmar to South East Asia creating a large swath of countries cooperating and reciprocating mutually in distributed development. The hub of this connectivity will be Bangladesh, and if this is achieved under the Awami League led government it could sound the death knell for the contrarians. People need jobs, food education for their children, and security of their lives which they lost for a period when the JEI and BNP backed JMB terrorists went on a murderous rampage from August 17, 2004.

The pot of gold at the end of this rainbow would be creation of huge number of jobs in Bangladesh in a number of Sectors. Such developments will not only help blue collar worker but also white collared workers—engineers, architects, executives, accountants and what have you. For the opposition, these developments are a huge challenge. They may have their dedicated cadres, but it is the people that matter at the husting. The JEI has started losing support because of the widespread news about their leaders' involvement in terrorism. The BNP has no development

plan to offer as an alternative. But pushed to the wall, these elements are going to hit back ferociously.

Here is Sk. Hasina's challenge. Since she became Prime Minister for the second time, Sk. Hasina has demonstrated maturity having learnt from the past. Diplomatically, she scored high points in substance, convincing foreign governments and businesses that the Bangladesh her government was creating was one devoted to seeking development and stability, eschewing religious bigotry, sectarianism and terrorism. The move to return to the 1972 constitution albeit with some sentimental religious issues but with secularism at its foundation has found resonance in the democratic states and governments across the world.

Domestic politics, however, is a great challenge. There are historical and contemporary ghosts that have to be exorcised. The most important among those, Sk. Mujibur Rehman's assassination has been addressed finally. But this does not complete the process of exorcism as the demons are there to overturn all. In terms of natural justice, the murders of Sk. Mujib's kitchen cabinet in November 1975, and that of pro-liberation intellectuals must be brought to a conclusion quickly. In this context, it must be noted that anti-liberation and anti-Awami League intellectuals and legal luminaries are growing in a meticulously planned surge.

The trial of war criminals must be concluded urgently. It is no secret that there are foreign countries who are opposed, some of which support Pakistan and hold Bangladesh expatriate jobs as a bargaining chip. NGOs from some of these countries, on the other hand, fund religious extremism and obscurantist Islamic terrorist organizations in Bangladesh even today. Prime Minister Sk. Hasina is the only person who can take a call on this. Connected with the external pressure are those figures, political parties and religious NGOs in Bangladesh who are involved in attempts to eliminate and change the direction of Bangladesh. Sk. Hasina needs to consider the following very carefully. If she goes ahead with the war criminals trial and eradicate the obscurantism, Bangladesh may suffer some economic consequences. But given the global situation enabling to-day, that may not happen.

On the other hand, if she gets paralyzed to inaction by such "possible" threats, Bangladesh will be overwhelmed by the resurgence of the force she is fighting. The onus is on Sk. Hasina. Sk. Hasina, the Awami League, and their liberal and progressive political supporters need to turn the clock back to 1971 and the initial years of independence to reassess who their friend were during those years, and look to the future. History is the age old teacher to chart out the future.

Of course, geopolitics is ever changing, depending upon self interest. But there are also constants in geopolitics for similar reasons. Pakistan has been discussed in this paper and Islamabad's strategy on Bangladesh and India is not going to change for a long time. Revenge for 1971 is written in stone in the GHQ, Rawalpindi. China did not intervene in the Indo-Pak war over Bangladesh for its own domestic compulsions at that time, including perceived strategic threat from Japan. Otherwise, Beijing was in support of Islamabad, and recognized Bangladesh diplomatically only after Sk. Mujibur Rehman was assassinated and Pakistan accorded diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh. Beijing, therefore, recognized Bangladesh only when a pro-Pak and anti-India government came to power in Dhaka through an illegal coup.

China's 1971 policy towards Bangladesh still endures. It is well known among strategic analysts and some Bangladesh politicians that Beijing decided in 2004 to support the BNP-JEI combine for the next elections as they perceived an Awami League government would allow in Indian influence. They were supporting Pakistan's policy. But the astute Chinese took a very sophisticated path. They invaded Bangladesh through perfectly legal infrastructure and military assistance to maintain their hold.

The ever changing Americans have a very complex strategic policy. In 1971 or the 1970s, Pakistan and China were cold war allies against the Soviet Union and India. Today, it has changed to new areas, with terrorism as the highest priority and reentering Asia. Leaving India aside, the Soviet Union now represented by Russia, came to nascent Bangladesh's assistance in more ways than one. There are others who empathized with Bangladesh's liberation struggle from Western Europe to South East Asia and Japan. They have not changed their positions. It was a wise decision for the Bangladesh government to go with Russia to construct its first nuclear power project. Russia is a more experienced and has the demonstrated expertise to construct nuclear power plants abroad. It is better equipped than China to upgrade Bangladesh's armed forces development, an issue Sk. Hasina has promised to enlarge. China has been heavily dependent on Russia for its own military modernization. It is for Dhaka to decide whether it will go to the main vendor or the secondary vendor.

The above are just small pointers that Bangladesh should consider. It must also look closely under a microscope the ultimate interest of each country which are wading into Bangladesh. Dhaka must also introspect why Myanmar, which is so dependent on China, refused to agree to China's proposal for road-cum-waterway from Kunming of China through Myanmar into the Indian oceans.

In the agreement Beijing offered to Nay Pyi Daw, there were ingredients that directly assaulted Myanmar's sovereignty. It is a critical time for Bangladesh to introspect deeply keeping history in mind, and diversify its foreign relations. It is upto Dhaka, a sovereign and independent country, to decide on its policies. At the end of it the Awami League lead government has to prove itself to the people of the country.

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