

# Bangladesh - India Ramifications of Identity Politics on Bilateral Relations

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The internal stability and socio-political climate of Bangladesh as that of other South Asian countries is of significance to India given the proximity and sharing of land borders apart from a fractious history. The developing visions of the future of the two neighbours are bound to influence one another. There is growing acknowledgement by the political leadership on both sides of the importance of collaboration and harmony on this front. Progress on geo-political, economic and social issues shall aid advancement of not only the individual nations but also provide credence to South Asia as a region. Bangladesh's evolving and contested national identity, a bi-partisan political order, socio-political upsurges and diversifying engagements with external stakeholders, all point to an eventful phase in the political life of the country. This paper seeks to establish the challenges and opportunities for furtherance of India-Bangladesh ties, in light of recent developments.

## **Who is Bangla?**

The manifestation of Bangladesh as a nation in its own right is a study in what has unfortunately been prevalent across South Asia i.e. alienation or alternatively empowerment along fault lines of religion with ensuing communal

and national strife. The contestation for political space and separatism espoused by a community are consequences of failure to give due regard, through reasonable if not equitable sharing of socio-cultural, educational and economic opportunities. The dissonance along religious lines is attributed to have its origins in the British colonial era wherein English education at least initially created classism between Hindu and Muslim communities with the latter not benefitting from emerging professional opportunities and an intellectual-cultural flowering, particularly in the Bengal province. This negative legacy of history is held dearly in the present-day as well, with Bangladesh opposition leader and MP, Begum Khaleda Zia stating that

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*“Our people were victims of divide and rule; there are forces in both our societies who continue to play on this fear psychosis to perpetuate mutual suspicion and thereby keep us apart”.*

Thus, in other words, the alternating appeasement of one religious group over another during colonial rule is understood as the root cause of political conflict in South Asia today. This historical blame game can be taken a step further to attribute the overall radicalisation of society and extremist discourse today in Bangladesh as also stemming from ‘divide and rule’. Nonetheless, what is perchance highlighted is the difficulty of fostering cohesion in the socio-political space of Bangladesh. Placing responsibility upon long-running colonial era legacies splits the accountability considerably. Alternatively, it may be helpful if identity, ideology, representation and even religious discourse are contemplated by Bangladesh as a sovereign nation. This should be done in a post-colonial context without awarding an over-importance to history. Extra-regional influences should perhaps be negated as well in the formation of the internal political climate and social psychology. Building and safeguarding strong and inclusive democratic institutions be it under the Awami league or Bangladesh National Party (BNP) shall be essential in enhancing public faith.

However, it must be acknowledged that unlike India which has needed coalition governments to form a majority on multiple occasions, the Bangladeshi masses have alternated between the agendas of the Awami league and the BNP, indicating indeed the viability and popularity of both. It is the variance in the

social and nationalist ideologies of these two major players that have the most impact on who suffices as Bangla. Herein diversity and national identity are yet to be reconciled with what the regional and global face of Bangladesh should express in the coming years.

### **Justice: A non-partisan domain?**

Increasingly, opposing views in Bangla society are being filtered through to the mainstream by appealing to the youth of the nation. This was demonstrated especially in the wake of the protests following the life-sentencing of Abdul Quader Mollah (Jamaat-e-Islami leader) for charges of rape and murder during the 1971 liberation war. The opposition party i.e. BNP urged protesters to also demand:

*“Justice for abducted BNP leaders M Ilias Ali and Chowdhary Alam, slain worker leader Aminul Islam and murdered tailor, Biswajit Das”.<sup>2</sup>*

While the Shahbagh protestors highlighted that their protest was non-partisan, that is not how the opposition leaders and their ally JeIB<sup>3</sup> view it. BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia has described the 1971 war crimes trial as an attempt to malign her political allies in anticipation of 2014 elections. February 2013 has seen Dhaka experience violence and vandalism by the JeIB and Shibir<sup>4</sup> protestors on the one hand while on the other student youth have protested what they felt was a light sentencing of a convicted war criminal. They felt Quader deserved to be executed given the scale of his atrocities.

The insecurity felt by right-wing activists is to some extent justified given that they were denied an opportunity to hold a counter-protest and that many legislators have expressed their support for prohibiting not only their activities but JeIB's right to participate in politics altogether. Any empathy or opposition to the war trials verdict particularly in this case, are emanating from political affiliations given that the accused is a politician. The wreckage done by the JeIB and Shibir protestors has only served as a catalyst in further politicising the trials. The aftermath could be said to already indicate a split in the national vote-bank. While BNP's allegation of trials being utilised for political brownie points by the government may very well be true; the conduct of BNP's allies has not endeared them to the masses. Arguably, when milestone historical events are scrutinised and contested politically it indicates the ultimate desire to take charge of a nation's reins.

What the incumbent government needs to be mindful of apart from their own longevity in the corridors of power, are the risks that may arise from disenfranchising the conservative right-wing. It's possible that if groups such as JeIB do not find a legitimate outlet in Bangladesh's democratic set-up or an audience with the ruling government they may turn their aspirations completely towards the more willing ears of dubious stakeholders i.e. terrorist outfits from Pakistan and or extremist political ideologies emanating from the Middle-east. While it is important to lay down the law, it would also be prudent to retain all participants involved in the mitigation of the domestic political process.

### **Hasina's track record**

While the disruptive conduct of BNP allies is not a good advertisement for a peaceful reign should they get elected, Hasina's administration has not been able to maintain order under its watch either. Recently the south-eastern part of the country comprising of the Buddhist community's villages witnessed communal violence. Hordes of Muslim protestors looted and damaged houses as remonstrations against alleged offensive references to the holy Quran on social networking websites.<sup>5</sup> What is particularly worrisome in this instance is that civil and police authorities were not adequately responsive to the minority community in its time of crisis. Meanwhile, citizens have also been arrested for posting allegedly derogatory comments about Shiekh Hasina online. Arguably this points to a lack of tolerance for dissent and freedom of expression apart from a considerable threat perception by the government that criticism could suffice to herald a toppling of their time in power. In wake of the Arab Spring, this concern is to be expected.

At the same time, the UN Human Rights Commission and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have expressed concerns over the government's conduct of the war trials. Their apprehensions arise as special rapporteurs of UN and independent experts have been denied attendance in a trial involving crimes against humanity. Moreover, an appeals process is found lacking in a trial that could include death sentences. To be fair, from a governmental or 'national' interest's standpoint, the rigid stance of the government indicates not merely a narrow screening of all proactive actors through a political lens but perhaps a view that certain international actors be they IGOs or NGOs, may interfere in the governance process of a relatively small country.

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### **Economic growth: Stepping-up**

The clearest symptom of democracy in Bangladesh is a results-oriented show of merit, induced significantly by the bi-partisan structure of politics. The looming 2014 elections have served to intensify and hasten the contest. The Awami league government under Shiekh Hasina has undertaken concrete measures to step-up the economic growth potential of Bangladesh. This has been mostly in the form of bilateral partnerships with various countries including India, thus paving the way for growth for both the present and future. The urgency may arise not only from a need for political sustainability or raising the

GDP but is possibly also inspired from neighbouring Myanmar that is attracting considerable foreign investments in wake of its ongoing political and economic reforms. Most notably, Bangladesh has recently strengthened its linkages with Russia through the latter drawing up a long-term agreement for nuclear power plant development. Interestingly enough, a report by RIR states that

*“It may be recalled that when BNP leader Khaleda Zia was the Prime Minister, she had approached China to help build nuclear reactors in the country.”<sup>6</sup>*

The report also includes that the expanding Russia-Bangladesh economic ties shall include the oil and gas sector and space and telecommunications technology apart from a foray into Bangladesh’s weapons market which has been thus far provided by low cost Chinese weapons. While electricity generation by the nuclear power plant is slated to commence by 2020, Russia has further entrenched its stakes in Bangladesh by granting the latter “a \$1 billion loan to cover purchase of Russian arms and military hardware”,<sup>7</sup> thus qualifying it as a favourable if not preferred provider. On the defence front Shiekh Hasina also commissioned the first ever warship, BNS Padma, “built in Bangladesh under Khulna Shipyard limited (KSY) and under the command of Commodore Khulna”.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Bangladesh finds itself benefitting from a redirection in the apparel industry wherein more business is expected to come its way due to increasing costs of Chinese labour. According to Siddique Islam, “Bangladesh is now the biggest supplier of apparel to the EU after China”<sup>9</sup>. Special economic zones (SEZs) are another undertaking that Hasina government is expected to

take up in a big way; given how much it has helped countries such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, India etc. The development of SEZs shall in particular help Bangladesh attract foreign investment for much needed infrastructural development. This is helpful, since government's funds alone shall not be sufficient. Presently, Bangladesh is export-oriented with agriculture being the backbone of its economy. According to the Eurasia review it accounts for "less than 20% of the GDP but employs 45% of the population".<sup>10</sup> What is particularly, interesting about the upcoming SEZs is that they shall be country-specific. According to Financial Express, Bangladesh may receive "Indian investment worth \$2-3 billion; another country that has evinced an interest in having separate SEZ is Japan".<sup>11</sup>

In the midst of all this foreign investment Bangladesh's infrastructural plans were briefly on hold when the World Bank withheld financing for the Padma Bridge.

"Until the government complete an investigation into allegations of corruption in the project, the bank has since received a letter from the government withdrawing the request for funds."<sup>12</sup> The bridge was expected to help in diversifying economic opportunities for people living in the relatively under-developed southern Bangladesh and improve connectivity in the immediate neighbourhood with Myanmar and India.

### **Cooperation with India: on the high road?**

In improving bilateral ties with India, the Hasina government has been particularly notable for working collaboratively to rout insurgent activity and other manifestations of transnational crime. This has been facilitated officially by way of an extradition treaty signed in January 2013 in Dhaka. According to *Dawn* newspaper,

"The treaty paved the way for Bangladesh to put on trial several crime bosses who were running their gangs by telephone from India and for India to bring back fugitive separatists who fled to Bangladesh, including ULFA leader Anup Chetia."<sup>13</sup>

While immigration, water-sharing and security across a 4000 km border persist as some problem areas, other doors and windows for cooperation are being readily explored. In the political sphere, the foreign secretaries signed a MOU in February 2013 to facilitate exchanges between the foreign services institutes of both countries. Additionally, cooperation has also been stepped up in medical research and improvement of informal trade channels in order

to overcome inevitable illegal activities such as food grain smuggling etc. Cooperation on transnational issues has been a harbinger of visa liberalisation and better land based connectivity between India and Bangladesh. This is being furthered through rail linkages, specifically the Maitree or friendship express that is “proposed to start from Kolkata and connect the town of Khulna and Jessore in Bangladesh.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Islamic terrorism: Looming menace**

Currently there is growing cooperation at the governmental level to disallow antagonistic anti-state elements from functioning and seeking refuge in each other’s territories. However, the threat of extremist ideology is particularly entrenched in Bangladesh due to a fraternity that exists at the global level. Fundamentalist propaganda can be sourced in Bangladesh from the post-1971 Liberation war era. Official support for extremist elements increased when Islam became the state religion under the leadership of Lt-Gen H.M Ershad. According to Hiranmay Karlekar,

*“A huge influx of funds from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia enabled Jamaat e Islami Bangladesh (JeIB) and its auxiliaries like Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) to build an extensive networks of mosque, madrassas and sharia courts.”<sup>15</sup>*

The political will to utterly oppose Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh is intermittent at best and may not be guaranteed under either the Awami league or BNP which may concede to engagement should it aid mutual political or business interests. Whether it is JeIB or underground groups such as the HUIJIB<sup>16</sup>, the leadership in neither Bangladesh nor India can draw an absolute wedge between the ideological and financial patrons of radical thought. This is not feasible in the globalised era or under the system of a liberal market democracy. Apart from neighbouring India, it is the moderate majority in Bangladesh that also finds itself the target of an extremist agenda which seeks to make Islam an all-encompassing feature of society. At the other end of the spectrum are the secular minded intelligentsia, civil society groups as well as Hindu-Buddhist religious minorities whose safety and very lives have been threatened in various instances. The liberal majority of Bangladesh shall perhaps find more room to blossom under the Awami League which according to Bertil Linter, “led the struggle for independence and grew out of the Bangla language movement and was based on Bengali nationalism, not religion.”<sup>17</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the onus is upon Bangladesh's political leadership which across partisan lines must steer Bangladesh in a moderate direction. That would help foster harmony domestically and within the immediate neighbourhood. Genuine democracy in Bangladesh shall thrive only if ideologies across the socio-political spectrum are allowed freedom of expression. Still, the harassment, violence and lethal proclivities of extremist groups such as JeIB, HUIB and ICS should be made to heed the rule of law and the tolerance inherent in democracy. The task of bringing cohesion in Bangladesh's social fabric shall only get tougher unless the radicalising trajectory of socio-politics is not addressed through public discourse involving especially the secular members of society.

The mutual willingness expressed by India and Bangladesh's leadership to disallow insurgent elements to function in each other's territories bodes well for bilateral relations. Bolstering of cultural and trade ties shall serve to undermine antagonistic extremist discourse that is inimical to India. Finally, the litmus test shall be the mitigation by Bangladesh's political leadership in adequately balancing through concrete measures, the widely differing visions of nationalism expressed by its citizenry.

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## **Notes**

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