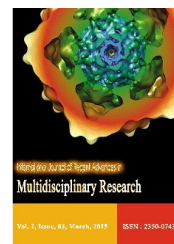


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Research Article

SOCIAL MEMBERSHIP AND HISTORICAL CONFLICT: THE CASE OF BANGLADESH'S AWAMI LEAGUE AND THE BANGLADESH NATIONALIST PARTY

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ABSTRACT

The conflict between the Awami League and the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) is ingrained in the history of Bangladesh spanning more than three decades. This paper delineates the history of the interaction between the two parties as well as explaining the militant activities of both as a part of the cultural environment in Bangladesh. Finally, I explain the distinction between social membership in anyone of these parties and the participation of elements of each party in violent activity.

INTRODUCTION

I begin this paper with the country and its current socio-political conditions with a historical and societal overview. This provides the background out of which grew the country's two main political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Bangladesh is situated on the Indian Ocean's Bay of Bengal in South Asia between India and Burma (Myanmar). Bangladesh is a densely populated country with a population of over 166 million people. It is approximately the same size as Iowa. The majority people in Bangladesh are ethnically similar; 98% are Bengali. The remaining 2% is made up of a variety of tribal Muslim groups.¹ Religion plays a dominant role in Bangladeshi society; 90% of the population is Muslim. Hindus make up 9.5% of the population. A variety of other religions and non-religious individuals constitute the remainder of the population.² Educational standards are relatively low in Bangladesh; only 55.9% of the population is considered to be literate.³

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¹ CIA World Factbook. South Asia: Bangladesh. June 23, 2014.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>.

² United States Department of State: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Bangladesh 2012 International Religious Freedom Report.
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208636.pdf>.

³ Amnesty International. Annual Report 2012: Bangladesh.
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/bangladesh/report-2012>

This creates an environment in which religion exercises a tremendous influence in the country's society. Imams – Muslim religious figures – and other Muslim leaders are often responsible for educating the general population not only in matters of Islam, but also about historical and current local, national and international events/affairs, and other important socio-political matters during sermons in the mosques. When the majority or even half of any country's population is illiterate, the opportunity for religious leaders (or other ideologues) to strongly influence the beliefs of that illiterate population is immense. Such an education results in an increased level of religious fundamentalism and a consequent rise in the level of religiously based intolerance and violence directed at those who hold non-orthodox religious views, or against those who express heterodox socio-religious and political views. Over 800 years ago Muslim invaders arrived in the region now known as Bangladesh and supplanted the Hindu and Buddhist dynasties who ruled the region at the time. Most of the indigenous population, as a result of the Muslim invasions, converted to Islam. Islam has been the primary force in shaping the history and the politics of the area ever since. In the mid-18th century Great Britain extended its power and influence in the region, outward from its base in Calcutta, India, and by 1859 had completed its dominion over what became present day Bangladesh. In 1947, Britain made the decision to partition India, which at the time included Bangladesh, then known as East Pakistan, due to the inability of the majority Hindu population and minority Muslim population in British India to live together peacefully. Consequently, British India was partitioned into present day India and Pakistan consisting of East Pakistan (today Bangladesh) and of West Pakistan, separated geographically by

India in between the two of them. India included the majority Hindu regions of British India, while Pakistan, both East and West, incorporated the majority Muslim areas of British India. The partition resulted in one of history's greatest population transfers. Millions of Hindus and Muslims fled to their respective new homelands – hundreds of thousands of people, both Hindu and Muslim were killed.

East Pakistan struggled economically from the 1947 partition to 1971. It also suffered West Pakistani exploitation and bloody West Pakistani military repression and massacres during this time. Supported by India, East Pakistan revolted and declared its independence as Bangladesh in March 1971. It is estimated that in Bangladesh's 1971 bloody struggle for independence that West Pakistani military forces, with the collaboration of some East Pakistanis, killed millions of East Pakistanis/Bangladeshis. Since independence, Bangladesh has continued to struggle economically and for political stability. The country suffers from ongoing political violence, governmental corruption as well as from rivalries and corruption within the police and security forces. After years of military backed "caretaker government," during which regular elections were repeatedly postponed and violence, a state of emergency was declared in 2007. While relatively peaceful elections were held in December 2008, the government since then, headed by the Awami League, has yet to demonstrate that it will be ultimately successful in establishing the rule of law and in creating stability and peace in Bangladeshi society. The history of Bangladesh is relevant to this analysis as it clarifies the trauma of its people – and the violence still present in its society today. Bangladesh transitioned violently from being part of British India to becoming East Pakistan and then again during its struggle to emerge as Bangladesh in a timeframe of only 25 years. Each transition included war, genocide as well as violent governmental upheavals/*coup d'états*. It explains in part why Bangladeshi society, having continually experienced disruptive and violent conditions, is a violent one in which minorities, political or otherwise suffer greatly. These conditions have also included the very acrimonious relationship between the AL and the BNP. Hatred of and prejudice/persecution of different religions, sects of the same religion, differing ethnicities, as well as of those who do not follow strict Islamic codes of socially accepted practices and norms, is deeply entrenched in Bangladeshi culture. In this culture torturing and killing one's enemy is not an uncommon or abnormal occurrence, as exemplified by the recent literal butchering of a secular Bangladeshi-American blogger by Islamic extremists in the streets of Bangladesh's capital city, Dhaka.⁴ Governments have repeatedly changed over the past decades of Bangladesh's history, resulting in increased ethnic, religious, and political tensions and persecution. To predict the actions of a future government, or whom it may or may not protect, is difficult. However, if one were to do so, it would be prudent to refer to Bangladesh's history and to its societal norms. Past and current conditions prevailing in Bangladeshi society demonstrate an embracement of political or so-called radical Islam, with its insistence that Muslim society and all those who live in one adhere to a uniform fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. A 2013 Pew Research survey indicated 87% of Bangladeshis thought Islamic

⁴ Attackers in Bangladesh hack to death American blogger, *Washington Post*, Associated Press, Feb. 27, 2015.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/unidentified-attackers-hack-us-blogger-to-death-in-dhaka/2015/02/26/a7b8944a-be30-11e4-9dfb-03366e719af8_story.html

Sharia Law should be the law of the land.⁵

Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Awami League.

Integrally part of Bangladesh's societal political structure are the AL and the BNP, the country's two main political parties as well as being among the main contributors to the endemic violence in Bangladeshi society. The BNP is led by Begum Khaleda Zia⁶ – the widow of General Ziaur Rahman – who acted as Bangladesh's Prime Minister from 1991 to 1996, and then again between 2001 and 2006. The BNP as a political party can be considered center-right in the political spectrum is committed to conservatism, nationalism, and anti-communism. It has been described by some as the Islamic conscious of Bangladesh⁷. The Awami League, which currently controls the government of Bangladesh, is headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed. She was previously Prime Minister between 1996 and 2001. The most recent election, on January 5, 2014, saw the reelection of Wajed. Her Awami League is the mainstream center-left party in Bangladesh whose ideology stems from a commitment to secularism. In spite of their official ideological differences, it is not these differences that have driven the animosity between the two parties. The rancor between them is rooted in power struggles between key individuals in those parties and especially between the leaders of the parties striving for the socio-political-economic dominance of the country. Much of the current contention between the two parties seems to be grounded in the historical personal rivalry and animosity that exists between BNP leader Khaleda Zia and Awami League leader Hasina Wajed. Among other differences, the two women hold opposing views regarding the importance of the roles their husband or father played in the struggle for Bangladesh's independence. Each woman insists that her husband, in the case of Zia, or father in the case of Wajed, had been the more important one, the "father of the nation". The conflict between the two women over this matter even reached Bangladesh's Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the late father of Wajed, was the "father of the nation."⁸ The personal animosity between these two leaders permeates their respective political parties and has been absorbed and personalized by the population at large that is dependent on the patronage of the AL or BNP for economic survival. Years of rotating periods of rule between the two women has resulted in ongoing political violence and politically motivated physical attacks on members of each other's respective party and the parties' respective mass socio-political-economic followers. Many have died as a result of this violence. On University campuses there has been long time ongoing violence between student BNP adherents and student AL followers. The student violence is often fueled by Professors dependent on the rival political parties for their jobs in a system of clientelism and patronage, or "pork barrel politics", which is an

⁵ Political Islam in Bangladeshi democracy, *East Asia Forum*, Mubashar Hasan, Nov. 21, 2014.

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/11/21/political-islam-in-bangladeshi-democracy/>

⁶ Bangladesh Nationalist Party website
<http://bangladeshnationalistparty-bnp.org/>

⁷ History Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), *Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Notes by BNP*, Dec. 22, 2012.

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/bangladesh-nationalist-party-b-n-p/history-bangladesh-nationalist-partybnp/504072106281273>

⁸ Bangladesh court rules on dispute, *BBC*, Mark Dummet, June 22, 2009.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8112099.stm

integral element in the socio-political-economic structure of Bangladeshi society.

“Every time there is a political crisis, violence between rival student organizations [sic] lead to university closures. These occur with such frequency in public universities that four-year degrees can take six to seven years to complete.”

“Since the inception of this country over 40 years back, students have been used time and again by almost all major political parties and their politicians for their own petty interests. And this has done more harm than good.”

“As a good number of teachers are linked with political parties, they cannot do their duties neutrally. This is making things worse.”⁹

The reality of corrupt political clientelism and patronage is also pervasive throughout Bangladesh's trade union organizations and have a consequent detrimental effect on the daily lives of Bangladesh's workers in their struggle to survive in a country that has been ranked 145 out of 175 on a corruption scale by *Transparency International*.¹⁰ Corruption has been endemic in Bangladesh for a long time.

“In Bangladesh, trade unions are highly politicized [sic]. Most of the trade unions are affiliated with industrial federations and even with the national federations of trade unions, which have got political affiliation with major political parties. The excessive political interference in trade unions indicate a trend towards a rapid mushrooming of trade unions in the country. It is also evident that most of the trade union leaders tried to perpetuate leadership by virtue of their strong political affiliation particularly with the ruling party without any approval or consent of the workers.”¹¹

In socio-political-economically divided countries such as Bangladesh options for survival are economically and politically limited. They are by necessity and in fact intertwined. Economically, individuals are required to build and actively maintain and nurture socio-political networks in order to secure employment and to thereby ensure a livelihood. These connections through necessity require membership in either the AL or BNP, or in a political religious organization/party such as Bangladesh's Islamic parties, which include Jammata-e-Islami, Bangladesh's largest Islamic party, and the Bangladesh Islamic Party (B.I.P). “It is not what you know, but who you know”. The saying could not be more relevant for the societal conditions that prevail in Bangladesh. Most individuals in Bangladesh, until now, have chosen to join one of Bangladesh's two the main parties – the BNP or the AL, which is currently in power. Jammata-e-Islami and the B.I.P., along with other more extreme Islamic parties, represent the growing appeal of political Islamism in Bangladesh

⁹ Violent student politics disrupting higher education. *University World News*, Mushfique Wadud, Feb. 14, 2014.

<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20140213133051119>

¹⁰ Corruption by Country/Territory, *Transparency International*, 2014.

<http://www.transparency.org/country#BGD>

¹¹ Politicization of Trade Unions: Issues and Challenges in Bangladeshi Perspective, *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, Md. Abu Taher, Apr. 1999.

<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/27767614?sid=21106026378303&uid=4&uid=2&uid=3739256>

as demonstrated by the Pew Research survey, referred to previously in this paper, which indicated that 87% of Bangladeshis support the implementation of Sharia Law in Bangladesh. Political Islam's appeal, in a society such as Bangladesh's, is based on the misconceived notion that only political Islam, i.e. Islamic rule, will rid society of corruption and exploitation. Reality has shown that in fact this is not so. There is not one country ruled by Islamic Sharia Law and principles that is free of corruption. One need only look at Saudi Arabia. It is ruled by an Islamic Wahhabi fundamentalist government that is certainly not free of corruption. *Transparency International* ranks this fundamentalist Islamic country 55 on its corruption scale of 175 countries.¹² Saudi Arabia ruled by fundamentalist Islamism is, however, free of democracy. Bangladesh's Islamist parties obviously strive to implement Islamic rule over the country. By definition, and in fact, such rule excludes all non Muslims from participating on an equal socio-political level. The Islamist parties of consequence in Bangladesh are Sunni as opposed to Shia Muslims. Therefore, their ultimate goal of fundamentalist Muslim rule would also exclude, besides non Muslims such as Christians and Hindus, all other non Sunni Muslims, such as Shia and Ahmadiya Muslims considered by Sunni Muslim as heretics, from participation in the Bangladeshi Islamic society they seek. Both the current AL government and the B.N.P. are aware of the fundamentalist Islamic threat to their power and strive to contain it even as they strive not to alienate Muslim support for their respective parties. As an example of this effort not to alienate Muslim support the AL Government, although it suffers ongoing denunciations from Islamists as well as from other Muslim adversaries that it is anti Islam, recently dismissed the Minister of Telecommunications. The Minister, even though a Muslim, was dismissed for his vociferous comments denouncing the Hajj – the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca and one of the 5 pillars of Islam.¹³ The B.N.P. has generally been viewed as being closer to Islamists than the AL has been. The AL has denounced the B.N.P. as being so – as well as for its close ties with Jammata-e-Islami and has used its position of governmental power, including its domination of the Bangladesh's courts and the security forces to harass the B.N.P., as exemplified by the arrest, in January 2015, of the B.N.P. secretary-general. The leader of the B.N.P., Khaleda Zia, was confined to her office by the police during the time of the January protest demonstrations against the AL Government. The secretary-general of the B.N.P. was arrested and charged with “arson, bombings and vandalism.”¹⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is the common people of Bangladesh who

¹² Corruption by Country/Territory, *Transparency International*, 2014.

<http://www.transparency.org/country#SAU>

¹³ Bangladeshi Minister Sacked after Anti-Hajj Remarks, *International Policy Digest*, Arafat K.

Upol, Oct. 10, 2014.

<http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/2014/10/07/bangladeshi-minister-sacked-anti-hajj-remarks/>

¹⁴ Bangladesh deputy opposition leader arrested in Dhaka, *BBC News Asia*, Jan. 6

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30694808>

have and who will continue to suffer from the chaos caused by the historical and current struggle for power between the AL and the B.N.P. This political chaos, manifested regularly by the violence between the two parties along with their supporters, has opened the door for political Islamist parties and groups in Bangladesh to increase their power and influence.

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