

Nightmares and Prospects in Bangladesh

Kai Bird and Susan Goldmark

It was a warm, humid Bengal evening when a small party of resident foreigners gathered in the Dacca home of an American diplomat. Two journalists, two American diplomats, a French diplomat and the director of a private relief organization in Bangladesh spent five hours talking about the country's bleak economic and political future. The discussion was heated, and the conclusions drawn in the early morning hours ought to evoke nightmares worthy of the cheapest horror film. The evening's host, a diplomat seasoned in the conflicts of Southeast Asia, reluctantly admitted that Bangladesh's rapid decline into absolute economic chaos might be averted only by a dedicated and ruthless party of Maoists. In any case, after more than two years of independence and \$2 billion of international aid, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Bangladesh has nothing to expect from the West.

Bengalis are only beginning to realize that, among other things, the oil crisis has deflated whatever humanitarian impulses the industrialized world held two years ago when Bangladesh emerged from a bloody civil war. But it is more than this: In five weeks of talking with Western relief workers, diplomats and Bengalis from all walks of life I encountered no one who had hope. The euphoria of liberation is long since dead, and black-market pragmatism has taken its place. Every Bengali I met was either frantically making his money by smuggling goods across the border or was in the process of leaving the country.

Bangladesh seems cursed. It is almost certainly the forerunner of tomorrow's Asia, a showcase of impossible horrors. The population, at 75,000,000 today, continues to expand at an annual rate of 3.2

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per cent. Inflation of basic commodities such as rice, vegetables and cooking oils has quadrupled in the last two years. Per capita consumption of rice has actually fallen in this rice-eating culture; today, only the urban middle class can afford rice; the peasants eat aid-wheat and sell their rice. Jute production, the country's only source of foreign exchange, declined in 1973, with only sixty out of eighty nationalized jute mills in production. Many of these are running at partial capacity due to continual worker slow-downs. Even the processed jute bales lie rotting at Chittagong harbor for lack of contracted freighters. The harbor itself, once one of Asia's most active ports, still has not been cleared by the Russian salvage team of the ships which were sunk during the war. Reconstruction projects will be hampered even more in the future due to the high cost of oil; this year fully one half (U.S. \$150 million) of Bangladesh's foreign exchange earnings will have to be spent on the importation of a pitiful 1.5 million tons of oil.

Cities filled with landless peasants, unemployed university graduates, a fat and poor bureaucracy, a scared and struggling middle class and a profitable black market are conditions that result from corruption and an outright failure to use the few resources in the country. Until now Bangladesh's only consolation has been the unifying and charismatic leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Prime Minister's popularity since the March, 1973, parliamentary elections, in which the Awami League polled all but seven out of three hundred seats, has been seriously eroded by the price squeeze, the massive unemployment and the politically vulnerable position of being totally dependent on foreigners to keep the people from starvation.

These economic problems have been accompanied by a significant increase in bank robberies, armed extortions from merchants and a series of political murders in the towns of Dacca, Jessore, Rajshahi

and Barisal. Small guerrilla warfare has broken out in the southwestern border district of Sunderbunj. In the December, 1973, nationwide municipal elections over four hundred positions out of four thousand were declared void due to the killing of candidates and the looting of ballot boxes. In the last six months Dacca newspapers have reported some three hundred killings across the country, and this figure does not include the number of "miscreants" shot by the Prime Minister's 20,000-member special militia, the Rakhi Bahini. During last September's Dacca University student elections, which have always been a guide to the national mood, the ballot boxes were stolen by a gang of masked students.

Local reporters had expected that the National Socialist Party (JSD), a new breakoff of the Awami League, would sweep the university elections and register the urban middle class's disenchantment with the Awami League's maladministration. This view was corroborated when the JSD held the largest political rally of the year in December; 100,000 gathered in the Paltan Maidan, a weed-infested ground adjoining the city's soccer field and central mosque. During January the government was obliged to declare martial law for the first time since independence because of JSD-sponsored nationwide *hartals* (strikes). The JSD announced they would break the ordinance and promptly launched their street gangs across the city, converging on the central mosque, only to be tear-gassed and beaten out of the holy building by the Rakhi Bahini.

Despite the JSD's sudden activity since its formation over a year and a half ago, the Party's leadership has been unwilling to make the necessary personality concessions to establish a united front with the other leftist parties. Consequently, the Awami League has never been confronted with a serious or respectable opposition. In fact, the Awami League has been able to coopt what parliamentary opposition there was; the Communist Party of Bangladesh (Moni Singh) and the National Awami Party (Moscow) have formally identified themselves with the Awami League in what is called the "Troika Alliance."

The remaining leftist party, the National Awami Party (Peking), is increasingly losing support to Naxalite breakoff groups led by personalities. One of the most prominent of these is Siraj Shikdar, who has created Robin Hood fame by looting banks, distributing the money to landless peasants and never getting caught. Shikdar, a former law student and a doctrinaire Maoist, receives financial support and protection from wealthy Dacca businessmen and at least one high army official. One highly successful entrepreneur told me, "You just cannot refuse a man like Shikdar; the chief of police himself once took him into his own home simply because Shikdar was a relative."



M. A. JALIL
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There are at least six and perhaps a dozen independent Naxalite parties operating in the Bengali countryside looting banks, executing landlords and confiscating land. These groups have shown themselves to be nothing more than regional peasant bands, and they have little desire to stand beneath a central umbrella organization like the JSD.

The president of the JSD, Major M.A. Jalil, is the most promising opposition leader in the country. At the age of thirty-three, he is young, popular among former liberation fighters and extremely ambitious. He has come to prominence largely on the wave of anti-Indian, Bengali chauvinism, even though his party's main line is "scientific socialism," which appears ideologically borrowed from Indian Trotskyites. In conversation with me, Jalil stressed that parliamentary politics was neither possible under Awami League rule nor attractive to a party that is exhilarated by mass "street" politics. Jalil will continue to dream of being swept into power by mass demonstrations; he would suffocate in the chambers of parliament.

Jalil lacks the universally acknowledged political acumen of the aged Maulana Bhashani, leader of the Peking-oriented National Awami Party. At ninety-three, Bhashani is undoubtedly the oldest peasant leader in the world, though he has managed to forecast and lead every major move in Bengali politics for the last forty years. Barefooted, bearded and complaining of stomach pains, he explained to me that he was an "Islamic socialist." The Maulana's reversion to Islam since 1969 has been one major factor in the factionalization of his party. His policies are Maoist, his concern is landless peasants and the "unconcern of bourgeois leaders like Mujib towards irrigation projects and flood prevention dikes that would make the Bengali peasant self-sufficient." His mind is direct and simple. When asked if he, as a devout Muslim, accepted birth control, Bhashani answered that he had no moral objections, but observed that such solutions to the food shortage crisis have only succeeded in industrialized nations. He pointed out what many economists have reasoned, that peasants must first believe that their sons will live and be fed before they will limit their reproduction. Bhashani was the founder of Mujib's Awami League, the leader of the language movement against Jinnah, the first to call for autonomy under

Pakistan, and the first politician to declare for Bangladesh's independence. Last December he read a statement to the press saying he now supported armed revolutionaries in Bangladesh, though he himself was too old to lead the final struggle.

This is the full range of opposition leaders in Bangladesh: Major Jalil, the Maulana Bhashani, and the loose collection of Naxalities. These are the men and parties which offer themselves as alternatives to Mujibur Rahman's somewhat Nasserite ideology of one-party democracy, nationalism and selective socialism.

Mujib's reaction to the mounting criticism and the poor security situation has been to take an unswerving law-and-order stand against "miscreants and agents of disruption." He has publicly warned the opposition that if their tactics become violent, he would not hesitate to take upon himself emergency powers. Few observers feel that he has demonstrated the same forcefulness against the corruption of his own closed circle. Stories of Awami League corruption have become commonplace. It is known that only Awami League students are given scholarships, that the local cigarette trade is owned by the Party and operated on the basis of hoarding, that members of parliament are on the take, and that party officials obviously live an inflated life with free housing, Toyota "official" cars and travel abroad.

Many relief organizations this year left the country early, so distraught were their workers over continual accusations that grain foods were being sold on the black market. The Bangladesh Red Cross is one example of how too much aid slipped into too few pockets. Wheat shipments from U.S. AID and the Catholic Relief Organization were being distributed by the Bangladesh Red Cross to Biharis in what is known as Mirpur camp on the outskirts of Dacca. According to the Red Cross, 160,000 ration cards were issued for the weekly wheat shipments. In the same camp British volunteers for "Operation Omega" told me that they had carried out an extensive census that counted 100,000 people in Mirpur. Wheat from 60,000 ration cards continues to be sold on the open market. "Tea money" in Bengal is culturally honorable; it is only the amounts of international funds that have been squandered that seem

to place the system in an intolerable light. Not only is the corruption rampant and flagrant, but there is little likelihood that the parliamentary opposition can ever gird itself to the role of ombudsman.

A visit to Bangladesh's parliament gives one a disturbing glimpse of the country's prospects. The chamber is dominated by a full floor-to-ceiling portrait of Mujib which towers behind the Speaker's chair. The opposition holds seven seats, but so meager is their presence that they disdain to describe themselves as opposition members. They use the term "independent" instead to distinguish themselves from the 293 Awami League members. A tall, well-dressed Awami Leaguer stands at the back of the chamber and for thirty minutes recites the "lessons" of the liberation struggle. He points to the portrait of Mujib and recounts how "the father of the nation" sacrificed himself for his people in Pakistani prisons. He concludes that Mujib is the only man capable of tackling the country's economic battle and that opposition to the Sheikh is necessarily undemocratic.

The opposition seats are nearly all empty, but the Chair does recognize one Abdullah Shilzher, independent M.P. from Chandhra, to respond to the Awami Leaguer's speech. Abdullah is a young man, possibly thirty years of age. He is dressed in white, wearing the plain Bengali pants and *kurta*, with a beautiful Pakistani shawl gracefully wrapped about his thin body. He talks for almost an hour about the beggars in the street, holding up newspaper photographs of the underfed and underclothed of Dacca to prove that the government is negligent in its treatment of the poor. Then he complains that his district is getting only half of the promised irrigation pumps needed for increasing rice yields. Someone at the back of the Chamber shouts out, on point of order, "Water pumps are fine, but where is the power for such pumps?" Abdullah replies heatedly, "You should provide the power, as you people have a monopoly of such things."

For lack of suitable partners the Awami League appears to be only playing at democracy. When will the drama end? Judging from the quality of opposition leaders like Major Jalil, and considering the disunity of the Left, one doubts that any change will occur from a political upheaval in the countryside. The rural backwaters of Bangladesh will simmer, millions will go hungry, communication with the central government will break down slowly, but the Awami League will retain power until there are no more resources to feed its own constituency. When middle-class Bengalis find that they cannot afford rice any more, as they now cannot afford fish, when the Awami League cannot deliver to its own people, the urban jute workers, civil servants, students and small businessmen, then the economic chaos predicted by an American diplomat one humid evening last winter in Dacca will surely herald another era of political calamities.



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