

Understanding the Bangladesh Crisis

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Events of recent days have focused world's attention on the multi-dimensional crisis situation in Bangladesh, an important country of South Asia having most of its land border with India (a much smaller part with Myanmar) and with a population of over 170 million. Bangladesh has a long coastal stretch and an intricate network of big and small rivers, contributing to beautiful greenery but also exposing the people here to cyclones and floods, all the more so in times of climate change.

In fact the first aspect to which one would like to draw the attention of readers relates to the extremely difficult conditions that prevail here for many people and the record of any government or leaders should be examined keeping in view these difficulties, something that is often forgotten.

Bangladesh was part of colonial India and suffered from the terrible exploitation by British colonial rulers for nearly two centuries. In fact the exploitation of this part of the country was known to be extremely acute, as seen from the very large number of famine deaths, the increasing poverty of peasants and the destruction of once flourishing weaving craft.

With independence in 1947 came the partition of the country, caused by the deliberate provocation of divisions among people caused by colonial rulers who followed a divide and rule policy. This led to large-scale deaths and displacement, coming on top of a mass famine which had just ended.

As a result of partition the new country of Pakistan emerged which in turn consisted of West Pakistan and East Pakistan, separated by a long distance. West Pakistan practiced internal colonialism against East Pakistan so that the sufferings of East Pakistan continued even after the end of British colonial rule.

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After 24 years matters came to a head when West Pakistan leaders and army rulers refused to hand over the country's leadership to the charismatic leader from East Pakistan Sheikh Mujibur Rehman whose party the Awami League had won a national level majority in elections. Mujibur Rehman, popularly called Banglabandhu, was instead arrested. A genocidal campaign was launched in East Pakistan by the army of West Pakistan and some local collaborators who generally consisted of the most fanatic and fundamentalist sections of society. Hindu minority families and intellectuals were targeted in particular.

Estimates of the number of people killed from this violence number between three million (the figure accepted by the Bangladesh government) so far and three hundred thousand, with a middle level figure being around 1.5 million to 2 million people. A large number of people also died from hunger and disease. Nearly two hundred thousand to four hundred thousand women were raped. Nearly 10 million people were displaced, a big majority belonging to the Hindu minority, and sought shelter in refugee camps set up across the border in India.

The USA under Nixon (and Kissinger) and China under Mao supported Pakistan all through in this genocide which continued for nearly nine months. Then the Indian army and local Mukti Bahini fighters joined hands to defeat the Pakistani army and secure the surrender of nearly 90,000 Pakistani soldiers.

Thus was born a new country named Bangladesh (former East Pakistan). Mujibur Rehman was released and on assuming leadership of the new country declared commitment to secularism and socialism which was reflected in the constitution too. However after about four years he along with most family members was killed by a group of army officers in August 1975. This was followed by army rule, dictatorships, coups and instability.

The overall result has been that the country and its people have suffered a lot. In addition we have the impacts of climate change which are reflected in more sea-storms, floods and intense heat waves. The angry sea is eating up land while the density of population is already very high, in fact the highest among the larger countries, at about 1,342 people per square km. This can be compared to 37 per square km for USA and 4 per sq. km for Canada. Among western countries the Netherlands is considered to be the most densely populated,

but in the case of Bangladesh the density is about 2.5 times that of the Netherlands.

This is why I stated at the outset that the development challenges are really quite tough here. Now in addition let us look at some of the structural problems. The inequalities in the country are high and it is not easy to take actions against the well-entrenched elites without risking hold over power. Conditions of international division of work allow for exports to expand manly in low wage conditions, and the terms of trade are often against the poorer country.

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Hence the evaluation of any leader should be only against the background of all these difficulties. Sheikh Hasina, the longest serving Prime Minister of Bangladesh who has left the country recently in the middle of violent disturbances, was able to provide the country significant achievements in development and stability in the course of nearly two decades. In the context of many important human development indicators, Bangladesh soon surged ahead of Pakistan despite having suffered internal exploitation for nearly 24 years. Bangladesh emerged as a leading center of garment exports. Hence for the greater part of her rule, Sheikh Hasina can be credited with providing reasonably good achievements in difficult conditions.

However serious difficulties started emerging after the COVID 19 disruptions due to which unemployment increased. In such a situation the anger against job reservations for freedom fighter families increased. Sheikh Hasina responded to this by making due changes.

In all democratic systems there are times when people come on the streets for protests. Some of these protests relate to very genuine problems, and as we have already indicated there are many genuine problems from which people suffer here in overall very difficult conditions. A democratic system is generally capable of reaching some agreement with such protesters because the government ultimately wants to settle things and the protesters are satisfied once they get a reasonably satisfactory response.

However things start getting out of hand once there is a foreign hand behind the protests and that too of some very powerful country or countries. Now in this situation the objective of the protests is no longer to ensure the settlement of problems but instead it is to go on

inciting violence and disturbances till some other and bigger objective of the foreign hand, like regime change or the ouster of some big leader, is achieved.

Sheikh Hasina faced this kind of a situation in the last days of her rule and it is to a significant extent due to this reason that the protests could not be settled in an amicable way. Of course it can be argued that she and her colleagues could still have found a way out with more skills and patience. To give an example, her government could have tried to separate the genuine protesters like some sincere students from those were following the dictates of the foreign hand and have been known for their cruelty and fanaticism. Under ideal conditions the sincere protesters wanting better democracy and improved job prospects could have been invited to reach an early settlement while a strong stick would have been used only against those undemocratic and fanatic elements which were part of a conspiracy of regime change.

However this is easier said than done. Also one has to remember that in the past not only was the family of Sheikh Hasina murdered by fanatic/cruel elements tied to the foreign hand, in addition assassination attempts had also targeted Sheikh Hasina more than once and even grenades had been thrown on her and her colleagues, leading to the death of several of her colleagues even though she survived somehow. Such past experiences increase the feeling of insecurity and in such conditions if she could not distinguish between some sincere protests and the protests of the fanatic and cruel elements who had always tried to harm her and her family then her difficult situation can be understood.

In due course more will no doubt be revealed about the foreign hand, but for the time being at least this much can be stated that that this was related to a significant extent to the refusal to hand over a base that could be used for strategic purposes, while the other big aim of the foreign pressures was related to weakening the friendly relations and cooperation prevailing between India and Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina had been warning against the foreign pressures on her and the efforts to weaken her.

Ultimately one is left with an overwhelming impression of the extent to which imperialism is responsible for the problems of common people—whether as a result of the long colonial rule of exploitation and ‘divide and rule’ policy, or the impact of the richest industrial countries in causing climate change, or the role of imperialism in pushing the trade and financial systems which place severe constraints on economies like those of Bangladesh, or the impact of imperialism in pushing for distorted health and pandemic policies which caused avoidable disruptions for livelihoods of people, or the hidden hand of imperialism in pushing for regime change and ouster of leaders, by involving even aid agencies and making unprincipled use of even fanatic fundamentalist elements, strengthening them in the process at the cost of secular forces. While imperialism is responsible for so much distress of people and for the harm caused to democracy and secularism, at the same time imperialism works in such a shrewd way that the affected and suffering people generally do not blame the forces of imperialism and instead sections of suffering people keep blaming each other for the distress.

The recent changes in Bangladesh are much more likely to have a negative rather than a positive impact, some signs of which are already evident. As far as the path ahead is concerned, there is absolutely no doubt that conditions for most people can improve on a sustainable basis only by following a path based on justice, peace, inter-faith harmony, democracy and environment protection, these precepts being integrated well with each other on the basis of local conditions.

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