



India and Bangladesh

Internal Challenges and External Relations

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On January 6, the Awami League government celebrated one year in office. While addressing to the nation, Sheikh Hasina said "We want to free the country of corruption, misrule, illiteracy and poverty by 2021". It's a long way to go, but one year is too short a time to judge the government and make an assessment of its performance.

The government has taken a firm decision to establish war crime tribunals for the trial of war criminals despite pressures from various quarters. The manner in which it handled the mutiny in the Bangladesh Rifles and its decision to expose the involvement of two senior officers from the National Security Intelligence who were involved in the Chittagong arms haul indicate that the government is willing to expose the militant-security forces nexus.

What are the challenges to the Awami League government? How does the internal politics impinge on Indo-Bangladesh relations?

I BANGLADESH: INTERNAL CHALLENGES

Challenges to the Awami League Government can be analysed under the following heads.

BDR Mutiny

Soon after the government assumed office, the mutiny in the BDR threatened to derail the peaceful political transition. 57 Army officers were brutally killed in the mutiny by the BDR. The government displayed utmost caution and handled the situation efficiently to avoid a major crisis. Similarly a confrontation between the military and paramilitary was avoided as the Army displayed utmost sense of discipline and maturity amidst grave provocation. The anger of the Army personnel at the carnage was evident from the reaction of the soldiers when the Prime Minister visited Sena Kunj just after the macabre

killing. The government set up two commissions to enquire into the matter. However, one of the reports that were made public has not revealed any conspiracy angle where outsiders may have been involved. The report attributed the mutiny to long existing grievances of the BDR. The incident is attributed to intelligence failure.

Currently the BDR trials are being held to try the mutineers who were involved in this carnage. The name of the BDR is changed to Bangladesh Border Guards but it continues to be seconded by officers from the Army. It needs to be mentioned that one of the demands of the mutineers was to promote officers from within the BDR to such posts. The Government has agreed to disband four battalions which were directly involved in the mutiny.

Islamist Challenge

The Awami League government had made it clear that it will pursue the militants in its election manifesto and after coming to power has declared that there would be "zero tolerance to militancy". It has also proposed South Asia anti-terrorism task force. "Whenever action is taken against militants, it is described as an attack on Islam. But it is not right. The militants have no religion and operate beyond boundaries." The government has started massive campaign by creating awareness in public with the help of Ansars, campaigning in educational institutions.

Keeping in line with words there have been several arrests of the Jamatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) cadres. The security agencies have successfully bust many terrorist modules. JMB continues to use Chapainawabganj and Jessore border to smuggle in bomb making materials from India. It has opened offices in the border areas to facilitate these activities. In May the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) was successful in arresting the person who manufactured bombs for the JMB and

later held another person who helped him in collating information on how to make bomb from the internet in June. In spite of successes in dealing with militancy a senior RAB official said that some of the JMB members have fled to Pakistan and are taking military training there. There are also media reports that the JMB is regrouping in various remote areas of the country like Bagmara.

The RAB in a significant seizure in March 24 was able to seize arms, booklets on jihad from the Green Crescent madrassa cum orphanage in Bhola giving credence to the long standing suspicion that some of the militant groups are using madrassa for their training and recruitment. This madrassa was funded by a UK based group indicating that some of the people sympathetic to the Cause of militants are channelizing money through the madrassas. Its founder Faisal Mostafa – a Bangladesh born British citizen – reportedly has linkages with the banned JMB group. The RAB arrested 32 Hizb-ut Towhid on April 18, another extremist group. They are active in are active in Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga and Jhenidah of Khulna division and have around 1200 cadres and also a women wing drawn mainly from madrassas. They are secretly carrying their work in the disguise of dawat.

The Lashkar e Toiba has its presence in Bangladesh. The Detective Branch arrested some Indian born Lashkar operatives in Bangladesh in July who confessed that he has been staying in the country for past 14 years and is organizing Mujahids for Ameer Reza, a Kashmir based LeT operative. The HuJI has a major presence in Bangladesh. There are also reports that the HuJI Bangladesh and LeT have close linkages. Many of these militant Islamic groups are linked to each other ideologically and have facilitated each others operation. For example the Ahle Hadith Andolan Bangladesh, HuJI and JMB share close relations. The JMB also had links with the Jamaat Islami of Bangladesh as some of its leaders belonged to Chatra Shibir – the student front of Jamaat. On April 22, the government has formed

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a seventeen member National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention in May this year .

Continuing its fight against the radical Islamists, the government in October banned Hizbut Tahrir (HuT) for its anti-democratic activities. Subsequently the Bangladesh Bank froze its accounts once the ban came into force. The HuT has been active in Bangladesh since 2000 even though this organisation remains banned in many countries of the world. The group has been advocating Khilafat and has been campaigning against the Awami League and other left parties in Bangladesh. Like the JMB it is opposed to democracy and western political institutions.

II

POLITICS OF RELIGION AND ITS FUTURE

The government has formed committee to try the war criminals who were involved in the killings of freedom fighters and worked against the liberation of Bangladesh. There has been some opposition to the government move. The religious political parties who were involved in the killing of the freedom fighters are against the trial have campaigned with their patron countries to put pressure on the government. Soon after the Awami League won it was clear that the government will try the war criminals as it is one of the issues in its election manifesto. The freedom fighters and other civil society members campaigned for the AL and have been putting pressure on the government to move ahead with its promise to try war criminals. Pakistan also sent a special envoy Mr Pervez Ispahani to meet Hasina and advised her against trying the war criminals. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has been putting pressure not to start the trial as the Jamaat Islami, the party which would be mainly affected shares a close relationship with the country. The government has been diplomatically campaigning to appraise the international community the need for the trial of the war criminals and in the process have been able to garner international support. The BNP has extended whole hearted support to the effort to try the war criminals and have clarified that it alliance with the Jamaat Islami was confined to elections. However, the younger generation of Jamaat leaders would not be averse to sacrifice the senior leaders who have been accused of war crimes. This will give a break to the party from its ignominious past. It needs to be noted that the Jamaat had undergone a crisis in 1983 when some of the student leaders of Chatra Shibir – its student front – declined to bear the burden of Jamaat's past and asked the party to rename itself.

The party managed to get only 2 seats in the December 2008 elections to the Jatiyo Sangshod and managed to get 4.55 percent of the popular votes. There were cases of corruption against two of its members of Parliament denting its 'credibility' as non-corrupt party. The party changed its name to Bangladesh Jamaat Islami suggesting its indigenous roots and also modified its constitution to make its membership open to all the Bangladeshis. The linkage of Jamaat to the JMB also worked against the party apart from its various pronouncements on the liberation war. The campaign by the sector Commanders highlighting Jamaat's anti-liberation activities also had affected the party's electoral prospect. The BNP led four-party government's well publicised links with the radical-militant groups, wide-spread corruptions and their naked effort to cling on to power by subverting the electoral process went against these parties resulting in crushing defeat.

The future of politicisation of religion appears bleak. In fact the campaign by the freedom fighters, sector commanders to educate the young generation on how some vested interest were not in favour of liberation and were responsible for killing of the freedom fighters had deep impact as Bangladesh had highest number of young voters. It is the civil society and a section in media who are relentlessly campaigning to bring these war criminals to justice. The pressure was such that parties like a faction of Islamic Oikyo Jote came up with a list of war criminals. The Jamaat has also established a Jatiyo Muktijoddha Parishad to claim its stake in the liberation war. It was not long time back when the General Secretary of the party had termed the liberation war as civil war creating national uproar.

The Supreme Court in an important verdict has lifted the stay on High Court's verdict on the 5th delivered in 2005. The High Court of Bangladesh had earlier declared the 5th Amendment to the Constitution introduced by former Military ruler General Zia ur Rahman as illegal. The case would come up for hearing in January 18. If the Supreme Court upholds the High Court decision it would be a historic decision in Bangladesh's politics. Earlier in its election campaign and soon after the restoration of democracy Awami League had promised that it would restore the 1973 constitution which would essentially means restoring secularism and Bengali nationalism – two of the foundational principles. The invalidity of the 5th amendment would also restore Article 12 that deals with secularism and Article 38 that bans religious political parties in participating in the elections. Apart from many unconstitutional decisions these two are important issues that would restore the spirit of the liberation war. Given

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the sensitivities on the issue of religion especially when so many years have already passed, the Law Minister has made it clear that it would not like to amend the Islamic inscription of Bismillah ur Rahman-ur-Rahim to the preamble of the constitution which was inserted by General Zia ur Rahman, the former military ruler. This is to address the campaign orchestrated by the opposition in that AL is against Islam. Interestingly, Bangladesh will have Islam as the state religion even if the 5th amendment is declared illegal. A petition challenging the eighth amendment that made Islam state religion is pending before the Supreme Court since 1988.

III INTERNAL CHALLENGES IMPLICATIONS FOR INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

The Indo-Bangladesh relations are in a positive spin since the military-backed caretaker government assumed power. Indian soldiers who fought the liberation war, for the first time were invited to Dhaka to celebrate Victory day along with Bangladesh Army. The Kolkota-Dhaka passenger train was inaugurated in 2007. The Bangladesh Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed also visited India – after a gap of ten years since the last Chief's visited. This clearly was a departure from the stance of the BNP government which blocked all kind of cooperation with rhetorical postures be it trilateral gas pipeline or proposed investment by TATA group. Soon after the Dr Fakruddin Ahmad's caretaker assumed power in Bangladesh, a policy was clearly enunciated that Bangladesh will not allow its territory to be used against India. It may sound theatrical as these kind of statements have become a cliché parroted by all the Bangladesh governments in the past but the actions on the ground has proved that the AL government is serious on the issue.

After the Awami League government has come to power it has been taking action against the insurgents from the North-East taking shelter in Bangladesh denying them base in the country. Bangladesh has made several arrests which attest

the commitment of the current government. For example on 10 April BDR handed over Sujit Debbarma of the National Liberation Front of Tripura to the BSF. On 29 May the Rapid Action Battalion demolished the camps of Kamtapur Liberation Organisation but was unable to arrest anyone because they fled before the raid. In recent important development Arabinda Rajkhowa, the Chief ideologue of ULFA was arrested in Meghalaya. In November ULFA's finance Secretary Chitrabon Hazarika and Foreign Secretary Sasha Chowdhury were arrested in Dhaka and were forced to surrender to the Indian security forces in Assam. Similarly, NLF Chief Bishwa Mohan Deb Burman was arrested in Bangladesh.

A pertinent point is Bangladesh has suffered more than India by tolerating the radical elements who not only have targeted India but the Awami League, left political parties, cultural events and cultural organizations. No one realizes this more than the present government as its entire front ranking leaders was almost on the verge of being wiped out in the August 2004 bombing in the Awami League rally. The country wide bombing followed by suicide bombing, a first in Bangladesh's political history was itself a threat for all that the Awami League stands for. Internally the government has busted militant networks and has made several arrest, externally it facilitated the surrender of ULFA leaders who had taken refuge in Bangladesh as Hasina rightly pointed out "we will create enmity by harbouring them -- this cannot be".

The militaries of the two countries conducted a joint exercise, first of its kind, in Jorhat district of Assam from 22 February to 7 March 2009 to test their battlefield tactics. This was also an exercise in confidence-building between the two Armies. India has also moved investment barriers for Bangladeshi traders. Now they can invest in India.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni visit to India in September set the tone for bilateral relations between the two countries. Bangladesh formally agreed to allow India to move heavy machineries for its Palatana power project in Tripura by using the Ashuganj port. The joint statement gave an insight to the future areas of cooperation: proposals to cooperate in the power sector, re-opening of Sabroom-Ramgarh trade route, opening of land route at Demagiri-Thengamukh on the Mizoram border, establishing border haats (markets) in Meghalaya. Earlier, the Commerce Minister Farouk Khan dismissing the security concerns and sovereignty issues raised by some quarter said Bangladesh will allow the Chittagong port to be used by India for trade of products mostly originating from the North-Eastern part of

India. And this would also benefit Bangladesh in long run to emerge as a regional hub for commercial activities. In this context India has announced US\$ 1 billion line of credit to Bangladesh to build infrastructure.

New Delhi has already agreed that it will allow transit facilities to Bangladesh to trade with Nepal and Bhutan during the just concluded visit of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. A rail route between Rohanpur and Singhabad has been finalised along with the long pending Akhaura-Agartala route. India has agreed to build 14 km. meter-gauge rail to make this line operational. India and Bangladesh have agreed to exchange power which could be 900 MW per annum 'depending on availability, price and need'. The government of Bangladesh has identified 4 points but the government of India is able to identify only two points where the exchange can take place. Connecting the transmission system in the two countries will cost US\$200 million. India has agreed to export 250 MW of electricity to Bangladesh from the central grid. India has offered assistance in building two coal fired power plants in Khulna and Chittagong each approximately of 1320 MW. Already India has removed 47 items from negative list. This was in addition to 56 items that was already agreed upon.

Awami League's land slide victory has given the two countries historic opportunity to forge close cooperation. The Party has strong electoral base given the fact that it has received 49.2 per cent of vote and it is on strong wicket than before to carry forward the relations between the two countries. Sheik Hasina's visit coming soon after the elections has much potential to mature and gain strength in the next four years that the AL is going to be in power.

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Views expressed are author's own.



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