

Bangladesh

by Dorrik Stow

Five years ago Bangladesh was born. It was a violent birth that promised a turbulent future, a dear price to pay for an elusive freedom.

Towards independence

Bengalis can barely remember a time when they were their own masters. More than two centuries of British domination left them socially and economically crushed, ruthlessly split in two by partition, and junior partners in the new Pakistan. In the quarter of a century after 1947 a strong colonial relationship developed between East and West Pakistan. The East had a larger population in a sixth of the land area: but 70% of the public sector investment, 68% of the development funds, 80% of all foreign aid and 70% of all government expenditure. And this was while exports from the East earned over 60% of the country's foreign exchange. The army, the government and the economy were dominated by West Pakistan.

In the elections of December, 1970 Bengal united behind Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, leader of the Awami League Party and champion of the Six-point programme calling for equality and devolution of power in a Federated Pakistan. Mujibur Rehman gained an overall majority and would rightly have become Prime Minister of Pakistan. However, President Yahya Khan and Mr. Bhutto, Leader of the majority party in West Pakistan, could not tolerate this prospect. After some attempt at negotiation, on March 26th 1971 they finally unleashed the full weight of the army on the people of East Pakistan. Ten million people fled from the bloodbath that followed, and more than a quarter of a million died in the struggle for independence. The world seemed to stand by and offered milk powder instead of political mediators.

Ten months later the Indian army moved in support of the 'Mukti Bahini' (Freedom Fighters) and Bangladesh came into being.

Dreams and Illusions

Under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the young nation showed both unity and determination. For the first time internal divisions seemed unimportant. Nonetheless, the obstacles to progress cast ugly shadows on the bright optimism of the new government.

- 1) The devastation caused by the war was immense-land, property and food had been destroyed; many of the most able men and women had been selectively massacred; the return of millions of refugees to looted homes and flattened villages was beginning.
- 2) Natural disasters, in the form of floods, droughts and famine, are perennial weeds in the garden of the world's poorest and most densely populated land. These continued unabated.
- 3) There was still a feudal system of land ownership, political power and education. Money and control was firmly in the hands of a small elite - a lasting remnant of British rule.

Bengalis set to work to rebuild their land. People's Unions and cooperative farming enterprises began to evolve in the countryside. Pockets of Bangladesh came under communist control. Despite (or because of) their apparent success, these efforts were seen as threatening by the landowners and ruling elite. Mujibur Rehman found himself forced to move against the vibrant reshaping of rural society.

Losing control

The land and tax reforms which had been promised, and even to some extent implemented, were withdrawn under

the squealing protest of the rich. The army was prevented from effectively cleaning up corruption in the government, which included the illegal smuggling of large quantities of rice to neighbouring India.

Mujibur Rehman began to lose the esteem of his people. He was either unable or unwilling to face up to his colleagues who were too busy lining their own pockets to be concerned with good government. He may have been a genuine idealist, merely inept at ruling; more likely he was a megalomaniac himself.

Towards the end of his third year as Prime Minister he began to tighten his grip on the reins of power. In January 1975, under the guise of fighting corruption, he declared himself executive-President and eligible for another three years in office. His opponents were dismissed or imprisoned. Western-style democracy was replaced by more authoritarian rule, which in fact did nothing to alleviate the situation.

Three troubled months

Few accounts of the months from August to November 1975 bear any resemblance to one another. What is clear from the confusion of reports is that Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, and two hundred of his family and followers, were killed on August 15th in a coup led by a group of junior officers. How much support or planning was behind this blood letting is uncertain; but there was little mourning for the nation's father and founder.

The new ten man civilian government which formed was overthrown on November 3rd, by Major-General Khalid Mosharraf, who appointed himself army chief-of-staff. However, widespread mutinies four days later ousted Mosharraf and introduced martial law headed by the triumvirate: Major-General Ziaur Rahman (army chief-of-staff), Commodore M. Hussain Khan (naval chief-of-staff), and air vice-marshal M.G. Tawab. These three

men have retained power up to the present time, and have promised to hold elections in the fall of 1977.

How much longer?

Bangladesh is now established as a non-aligned nation with close ties to other Moslem countries, including Pakistan, and growing financial support from OPEC. The government is fervently anti-Indian and cool towards the USSR, but has good relationships with both China and the United States. It appears little closer to liberating its people from poverty and oppression than it did five years ago.

The outside world seems quite unable to assess the reasons for Bangladesh's continued gloom. Over-population, entrenched religious attitudes and unmatched corruption are often blamed. A far more significant factor is subject poverty, nurtured by the political domination of an elite which refuses to relinquish its power.

Fundamental changes are urgently needed in both education and Fundamental changes are urgently needed in both education and agriculture. The educational system is such that only the rich can afford it; in the countryside the numbers of landless peasants increase, the small landholders struggle on, often deeply in debt, while the landowners and moneylenders prosper.

As conditions continue to worsen there is some hope that the poor will be forced to organize themselves for political action. There may have been flickers of hope in this direction in the past, there may be the beginnings of a social stirring now but both political sophistication and an obvious leader are lacking. Bangladesh probably faces a long period of bumbling, caretaker government before radical and imaginative changes take place.

(This study has arisen from a personal involvement in the liberation of Bangladesh, and from many useful discussions with Bangladeshi students at Dalhousie to whom thanks are extended)

FIGHT FOR RIGHTS

by Lynn Stow

"First they arrested the communists, but I was not a communist, so I did nothing. Then they came for the Social Democrats, but I was not a Social Democrat, so I did nothing. Then they arrested the trade unionists, and I did nothing. And then they came for the Jews and the Catholics, but I was neither a Jew nor a Catholic and I did nothing. At last they came and arrested me, and there was no one left to do anything about it."

(Clergyman imprisoned by the Nazis)

Members of Amnesty International believe quite simply that people have a right to freely express their political and religious convictions. They are also aware that many governments are literally "getting away with murder", under cover of a benign facade and empty promises. The U.N. Human Rights Commission provides a comfortable fence for government representatives to sit on, while they take a course on "How to Make Friends and Influence People". Meanwhile, political repression and the use of torture continue to occur on a wide scale, and ignoring these facts will not make them go away.

Comment on Amnesty's work has ranged from the very positive through the sceptical to the hostile. Few people agree with everything it has done, while most agree with something. Some governments have disputed its motives and shown resentment at its somewhat presumptuous tactics. Potential supporters, on the other hand, have expressed doubts as to its effectiveness and its relevance. Arguments arising out of mild or serious cases of paranoia can be refuted without too much difficulty. Those resulting from an awareness of the complexity of the issues involved, and of the relationship between political freedom and other fundamental rights, deserve careful

consideration as the organization evolves.

Biased?

A frequent charge levelled at Amnesty by governments is that of selective blindness amounting to political favouritism. This view-point polarizes the world into 'friends' and 'enemies' and categorizes the organization as promoting the cause of capitalist or communist imperialism, as the case may be. It leads to a highly subjective interpretation of human rights violations:

"no evidence can be found of your equally strong interest in mobilizing world opinion against crimes which bypass national frontiers, such as South African apartheid...." (Somalia)

"if you are really concerned about the lot of underprivileged and oppressed peoples, it is suggested you approach certain prominent member - states of the Organization of African Unity and your friends behind the iron curtain..." (South Africa)

A strangely ambiguous attitude may often be apparent:

"Amnesty International is in a leading position among organizations which conduct subversive anti-soviet propaganda. It disseminates falsified materials in capitalist countries...." (U.S.S.R.)

"Amnesty International has issued a revealing document...it comes to confirm, with the authority of this humanitarian organization..." (U.S.S.R. on publication of report on Spain.)

Interfering?

A further line of defence for governments is to brand Amnesty as a group of interfering foreigners. Underlying this accusation is the assumption that the actions of a government are sanctified by virtue of its having come to power, by whatever means. It is a dubious kind of nationalistic self-



determination that relies on coercion, and that denies participation to "interfering citizens" who step out of line.

Naive?

Amnesty does not adopt prisoners who have used or advocated violence to achieve their ends. This has led to the charge by some that it is "out of touch with reality". The boundaries of violence are rarely clear-cut, and economic and social exploitation can be seen as a less sensational, but no less damaging form of violence than the physical kind.

However, the arguments used to justify acts of violence against the authorities often come close to those used to justify imprisonment and ill-treatment of dissidents. The anticipated end is seen to justify the means, and the concept of a 'necessary evil' is propounded. To accept such a concept would be to prejudice Amnesty's claim to be a humanitarian organization, a claim which, as long as it is justifiable, is one of its greatest strengths. Amnesty constantly faces dilemmas as it tries to ensure both maturity in its judgment and consistency in its response. This particularly true in cases where the spirit and the letter of human rights protection appear to conflict.

Irrelevant?

The vast majority of Amnesty members and supporters are to be found in western Europe and North America. This is partly due to the difficulty of operating in some areas (in 1975, members were arrested in Nepal, South Korea, the U.S.S.R. and Peru). A further factor is the issue of Amnesty's relevance in the context of denial of basic economic, social and political rights on a mass scale.

The organization seems to be developing towards a more preventive approach to complement its technique of individual adoption of prisoners. Irrevitably the preservation of political rights must be seen against the background of broader questions of social justice. Effective ways must be found to inform people of legal safeguards that are there to protect them from arbitrary arrest as 'agitators' of one kind or another. Knowledge of one's political rights may often be a prerequisite to changing an oppressive situation, and doing so from within.

Ineffective?

To write a polite if insistent letter to an official in some far-off place may seem a feeble gesture that can have no impact on a ruthless government. For

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