Chapter 3

Bangladesh: An Unsteady Democracy

D. Hugh Evans*

The creation of Bangladesh in December 1971 was as much a struggle for constitutional justice as it was a movement of ethno-linguistic nationalism. Yet, the country’s experience as a multi-party democracy could be said to have only properly begun in the 1990s. For most of its first two decades of independence, Bangladesh was dominated by regimes that had a hard time reconciling the pressing development priorities of one of the world’s poorest nations – an international basket case to cite Henry Kissinger’s grim metaphor – with the requirements of Western-style democracy. These governments made some progress in improving the country’s socio-economic condition, but much more still needs to be done. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has averaged a consistent, if unglamorous, 4–5 percent growth since the late 1970s;¹ the population growth rate has declined from 3.2 percent in the early 1970s to around 2 percent today;² average life expectancy has risen from 46 years in the 1970s to an estimated 55 years in the early 1990s;³ and the male literacy rate has steadily increased to almost 50 percent though the female literacy rate remains an abysmally low 22 percent.⁴

Though two successive military-backed regimes after 1975 initially justified their control on the grounds they were better placed than elected alternatives to provide the state with clear, effective leadership, neither was able to fully ignore the pressures for a return to democracy. Such pressures reflected not least the high degree of political consciousness and ideological diversity among Bangladeshis in the wake of their triumphant liberation struggle. Indeed, both General Ziaur Rahman (1976–81) and General Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982–90) strove to secure legitimacy for their regimes by appropriating the trappings of democratic ‘accountability’.

*D. Hugh Evans is a member of the British diplomatic service. However, the views expressed in this chapter are the author’s own and should not be taken as an expression of the views of the British Government.

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They founded their own political parties, sought to ensure that these parties secured comfortable parliamentary majorities, and ratified their own transitions from army chief to civilian executive president through carefully instigated national referenda.

Nonetheless, the collapse of the Ershad regime in 1990 and the rapid transition to a genuine multi-party democracy finally underscored the limits of these attempts at ‘guided democracy’. It is clear that the timing of this transition was influenced to some extent by events elsewhere in the post-cold war environment – placing Bangladesh firmly in the so-called ‘third wave’ of developing nations, which abandoned their authoritarian models in favor of a process of democratization. However, the key factors that gave impetus to the struggle for democracy in the late 1980s were largely rooted in the domestic political context. After outlining the events leading up to the landmark 1991 elections, this study will focus on both the achievements and weaknesses of the country’s ongoing constitutional experiment. It will highlight certain distinctive trends in recent years, notably the unwillingness of rival parties to abide by parliamentary rules and the apparently diminished risk of military intervention, and conclude with some thoughts on the longer-term prospects of democracy in Bangladesh.

DEMOCRACY: WON AND LOST

It was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1971–75), Bangladesh’s founding father and hero of the liberation war against Pakistani military oppression, who first turned away from the country’s democratic foundations. This was despite the fact that the legitimacy of his regime had rested on his party’s, the Awami League’s (AL), sweeping victory in undivided Pakistan’s first and only parliamentary elections in 1970. As the party that had championed East Pakistan’s interests in the 1950s and 1960s and later spear-headed the independence movement, the left-of-center and secular nationalist AL initially dominated the new state – a fact reflected in its overwhelming triumph in the 1973 parliamentary elections. Parties associated with the former undivided Pakistan had either disappeared or, as in the case of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI or Party of Islam) and other Islamic groups, been proscribed because of their active collaboration with the Pakistan army’s brutal crackdown on supporters of the independence movement in 1971.

Mujib’s government undoubtedly faced formidable challenges arising out of the new state’s precarious origins. Bangladesh was the foundling of not one but two partitions in South Asia: that of 1947 between India and Pakistan, as well as that of 1971 between West and East Pakistan. With 10 million refugees in neighboring India, the country inherited a shattered and predominantly agrarian economy that had long been subordinated to the industrial needs of first British-ruled West Bengal, and subsequently West Pakistan. Much of its small professional class was killed in the liberation