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## COMMENT 272 – Bangladesh: How To Recover From the Disaster?



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The political situation in the run-up to and the aftermath of the election has brought violence and uncertainty. This editorial considers the issues and challenges which threaten the country’s future.

### 1. On the wake of the quota system movement

SADF was invited to Bangladesh – neither by the government nor the opposition but by Secular Citizens Bangladesh, an independent organisation getting together secular Muslims and religious minorities– to observe the elections. We listened to as many of the different political voices as time and opportunity allowed.

My meeting in the Pan Pacific Sonargaon, Dhaka, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January this year, with a huge delegation of the student movement led by Mr Nurul Haque Nur, (magnificently reported by Madalena Casaca, [2024.01.13](#)) allowed me to understand the disaster brewing in Bangladeshi society.

Mr Nur had in [2018](#) been the leader of the movement against a quota system for relatives of the ‘heroes of the 1971 liberation war,’ and he spoke at length against it during the meeting as the symbol of everything that was not going well in the country.

If I could easily agree with him on this point, as well as others stemming from a country with a limited democratic tradition and a weak system of checks and balances, I fully disagreed with him on his obsession for blaming India for the political problems of the country as well as with the condition of installing a caretaker government for organising elections, a ‘solution’ imported from Pakistan

and seen nowhere else in the world.

Mr Nur seemed to me well intentioned, Western-minded, but quite unaware of what was to me the inevitable consequence of the political proposal he was supporting: chaos, violence and the rise of Islamic fanaticism.

It is not my intention here to make a detailed analysis of what went well and what went less-well in the fifteen years of Sheikh Hasina's government in Bangladesh, but it seems clear to me that it achieved remarkable successes in combatting terrorism, promoting women's rights and education, and encouraging a strong economic recovery.

As regards the ideological framework that feeds terrorism, however, the Bangladesh authorities narrowed their action to the judicial prosecution of those who had participated in the genocide of 1971, as well as their political expression, the Jamaat-e-Islam. While Islamist indoctrination expansion was allowed to continue the security combat on 'terrorism' most likely led to abuses.

Beside this, nothing was done to reinforce the system of checks and balances, allowing the impression that the government controlled every leverage of power. It is doubtful that corruption, and in particular nepotism, was more widespread in Bangladesh than in comparable countries, but it is true that it was perceived as very high.

The general mood of my interlocutors was not optimistic, and the boycott of the elections by all the most relevant opposition groups (including the party of Mr Nur, the Gana Odhikar Parishad, 'People Rights Council') did certainly contribute to the general discredit of the democratic system.

However, I was impressed with the working of the electoral machine during the elections, apart from some important points that needed to be changed. Notably, I was dissatisfied with both the pressure of the authorities to prevent our team from thoroughly doing our work independently and the counterpart pressure of externally financed NGO's, that painted a scenario of widespread electoral fraud that did not exist.<sup>1</sup>

The SADF team included individuals from different professional and academic backgrounds and it was not possible to reconcile their divergent views in a long report.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Bangladesh Transparency International ([2024.05.29](#)) p. 21, 'Grabbing booths, publicly sealing ballots, ballot-staffing, casting fake votes' had been observed in 51% of the seats.

## 2. *The rehearsal of the past*

The concept of caretaker governments was added to the 1973 [Pakistan] Constitution by Gen Zia-ul-Haq in 1985, (...) through a presidential order, known as the Revival of Constitution of 1973 Order, 1985 (RCO)’ (Dawn, [2023.08.08](#)). It was first introduced in Bangladesh in 1990 to enable transition from military to civilian government (The Business Standard, [2024.08.08](#)), institutionalised in 1996 by the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution and abolished by the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment in 2011 (Manir, [ND](#)), only to resurface now.

The core idea of the concept is that democratic institutions are intrinsically partisan and therefore unable or unwilling to conduct free and fair elections; therefore, a supposedly neutral government should be nominated to conduct them. In a nutshell, it goes against the core idea of modern democratic systems where ‘checks and balances’ are seen as the best available method to limit the abuses of power.

Its implementation, either in Pakistan or in Bangladesh, shows it hardly guaranteed neutrality, but actually increased the interfering power in the elections of non-elected structures, such as the military, and served as an obstacle to the introduction of a general system of balances of power.

Muhammad Yunus integrated the Bangladesh caretaker government in 1996, reportedly, after declining the invitation to head it (Alamgir and Khan, The Daily Star, [2024.08.09](#)). This government was seen as partisan by the opposition that boycotted the elections, but did not prevent the elections from taking place (Biswas, [2024.01.07](#)).

In January 2007, the then main opposition party, the Awami League, again announced a boycott of the elections for lack of trust in the organisation of the elections by the existing caretaker government, but this led to a military intervention, a new caretaker government and renewed violence and instability which continued until December 2008 (Biswas, [2024.01.07](#)).

These periods of over two years of rule by caretaker governments – that were supposed to last only for three months and to neutrally organise elections – were marked by a concerted failure to replace the existing party establishment, attempts where both the military and Muhammad Yunus played a central role.

The International Crisis Group ([2008.04.28](#)) made a detailed study of the events, especially under heading 4, ‘the Real Agenda’ (pp. 16-22) that is essential reading if we are to make sense of what is now happening in the country. Under ‘The Army

role’, the report explains that the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), moulded after its Pakistani counterpart, the famous Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), was the real power within the country.

Similarly to what happened before in Pakistan (namely with the [creation](#) of the Pakistan Muslim League, inspired by Zia-ul-Haq), the plan was to create a new brand party out of the ashes of the political establishment:

‘Less than two weeks after the takeover, the emergence of a new political force suggested the shape of a plan to displace the established parties. On 23 February 2007, the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and founder of the micro-credit pioneer Grameen Bank, Dr Mohammad Yunus, announced formation of a party, Nagorik Shakti (Citizen’s Power). He clearly had the blessings of the army and government, as well as many prominent civil society supporters’ (p.20).

The plan did not work out, and Yunus abandoned it, announcing he was dropping out of politics. Military rule rested on massive repression. This report estimates the number of mostly arbitrary arrests in the first year of the emergency military rule at 440,000. (p. 17). The arrests included both the leaders of the two main established parties, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, on politically inspired charges of corruption, something that has been a common practice in the country, and would mark Sheikh Hasina’s rule as well.

What we are seeing happening in the country now resembles what happened then, with some significant and some less significant differences.

The elections duly took place in January 2024, but six months after, an insurrection apparently led by ‘student organisations’ but with the full participation of the Islamist extreme-right, led to the Army intervention and the fall of the government. Extreme violence has targeted religious minorities, the Awami League, and other left-wing forces, before as well as since the downfall of the government. This humanitarian catastrophe continues to unravel as these lines are written. From personal sources I cannot identify, to public ones, mostly coming from neighbouring India, the evidence of large scale politically and religiously motivated murders and acts of vandalism abound (see, for instance, Begram, [2024.08.16](#), or the Communist Party of Bangladesh, [2024.08.04](#)). The Hindu community, as was the case in the genocide of 1971, has been a prime target.

Like seventeen years ago, a new political party has been announced (Daily Star,

[2024.08.16](#)) animated by those who called Yunus into power. For the time being, both serve to give a façade of respectability to the ‘revolutionary movement,’ downplaying the ongoing atrocities, but nothing indicates they will have a long-term role in Bangladeshi politics.

The Army has been so far discreet, but the continuation of the present on-going chaos will probably force it – even if it had no intention to do so – to become a prime actor in the political scene.

The most important and worrying novelty is the prime role of the Islamist extreme-right, from the outlawed Jamaat-e-Islami, quickly brought into the lime-light, to all other political expressions of the phenomenon (Ahmad, T. MEMRI, [2024.08.13](#)).

### 3. A new needed vision

It will not be easy for the Bangladesh civil society to find ways out of the present disastrous situation of the country, although this remains its main responsibility and vital interest.

For whomever has observed the situation of the country like me, the responsibilities of the West for the present crisis are quite clear. The western blind eye on the Islamist extreme-right<sup>2</sup> has been at the centre of my reflections for quite some time, if for no other reason than because it has never forgotten to target me.

The transformation of the 7 October pogrom into a perceived genocide attempt against the Gazan people by the dominant Western media and institutions (Casaca, [2023.11.07](#)) convinces me of how futile it is to try to explain the reality for those who do not want to see it. Memory is short, ‘loud’ voices in social media and ‘reality’ or populist politics dominate, appeasement is easier than confrontation. ‘We’ live with the consequences of allowing the empowerment of the Islamic extreme-right in Afghanistan, but what now for Bangladesh? We should look again at the root causes of our blindness to extremism.

Complex phenomena do not have simple explanations, and this one is not an exception. Comparing the tragic events of 1971 with those of 2024, there is one difference that immediately comes to mind: western public opinion then was able to show its independence regarding convenient political institutional blindness. Without those social ‘checks and balances,’ as important as checks and balances in

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<sup>2</sup> There are several reasons for using Jihadism, or more precisely, ‘modern Jihadism’ to the challenge presented by this fanatic movement to the humanist values, that SADF ([2017.03.02](#)) aligned in a text dedicated to ‘Jamaat-e-Islami’. Still, the sprawl of oxymorons such as the ‘Queers for Palestine ([2024](#))’ made me think how appropriate to use a classical vocabulary.

government, things might have gone in quite a different way.

It is overcoming this lack of independence that I think is more than ever essential if we want to reverse the tide of extremism, in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

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