

# Bangladesh: The Adolescence of an Ancient Land

Saira Wolvén

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## Executive Summary

On January 11, 2007, a state of emergency was declared in Bangladesh. A new caretaker government which condoned greater military involvement in the governing of Bangladesh was installed. This is the third time in the country's short history that an emergency has been declared in the name of safeguarding democracy. In order to prevent Bangladesh from devolving into autocratic rule, like in previous times, certain measures are necessary.

- Greater dialogue between political parties.
- Concerted efforts by the leaders of the country, both civilian and military, to devise an exit strategy for the current government.
- Civil society's cooperation in helping the current interim government to try and sentence the real criminals (including those charged with corruption) in custody.
- Realization among the population at large, political parties, and civil society that there is a real need for reform of some key institutions, and that the Electoral Commission must be given the necessary time to introduce the changes which will make these institutions more transparent and democratic. Therefore support should be given for an extended mandate beyond the stipulated 90 days, provided the interim government and Commission's intent remains above suspicion.
- Closer control of the Rapid Action Battalion (a paramilitary group created to fight terrorist activities in Bangladesh) by the interim government and reduced support for RAB activities by the international community are essential.

During this sensitive period, the international community, for its part, ought to strive toward better cooperation. Currently it is divided by opposing interests with little substantial dialogue between the developed, sub-continental (primarily India), and Arab nations. While they welcome assistance in the social and economic sectors, the Bangladeshi are weary of

international involvement in their political arena. Greater transparency would allay these fears.

Certain other issues which could impact the present situation are the democratic practices between the parties themselves and the consequences of dynastic politics along with the increase in food prices and electrical problems affecting mostly the poorer segment of society.

It is the conclusion of this report that although democracy in Bangladesh is still fragile and in its nascent form, the opportunity presented by the latest state of emergency, if handled correctly by the present non-elected government with unified, transparent, support from the international community, could help strengthen local structures and establish true democracy in Bangladesh, not only in name but in practice.

## I. Introduction

Bangladesh finds itself in a period of uncertainty following the derailment of the normal electoral process that had been scheduled for 2007. Blame has been placed primarily on fractious and corrupt politicians, but the 'failure' of democracy cannot perhaps be so easily defined; indeed, the real question is whether democracy has really taken root in Bangladesh at all. In 1971, Bangladesh was born with the promise that people's rule would prevail instead of the military dictatorships that had largely characterized the time when Bangladesh constituted East Pakistan. That dream still drives the people of Bangladesh; however, the country appears to have remained stuck to a type of democracy not uncommon in many developing countries, where it exists in form but hardly in practice. Democratic institutions are present, elections are held at regular or almost regular intervals, inter-party rivalry—including the opposition parties constantly railing against the party/government in power—is present, and a reasonably free press exists. Yet these standards of democracy are hollow in the absence of accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. Even an institution such as the Parliament had for its last two sessions, before it closed in preparation for the latest electoral process, failed to play its role as the forum where people's issues were raised, discussed, and decided upon. Indeed, true democratization may be said to have not yet occurred in Bangladesh.

Elections were due to have taken place in January 2007. A caretaker government was chosen in October 2006, as stipulated by the Constitution, in order to facilitate the electoral process. Due to rising levels of tension and the withdrawal of one of the two main parties from the process, the president, with the support of the army, declared a state of emergency on January 11, 2007. Since then, the army is seen to have played an increasingly bigger role in Bangladeshi politics. Their self-proclaimed agenda is to use this opportunity to fight corruption and to instigate changes that will ensure not only fairer elections but also attempt to establish the rule of law where

democracy can flourish both in principle and in practice. But the populace of Bangladesh, though they initially welcomed the state of emergency, is growing suspicious that the army may have a more sinister agenda. The new military-backed caretaker government has announced that elections will take place in late 2008. Many fear that this long period will allow the military to get comfortable in their new position and make it more difficult for them to surrender power. Unfortunately, history has shown that, more often than not, the suspension of democracy has followed situations of this kind in Bangladesh.

This paper will attempt to identify the key factors contributing to the current political situation and situate the fears of the population in the country's historical context. The central objective of this report is to explore whether, given its history and current political impasse, Bangladesh will devolve anew into an autocratic state or continue toward becoming a real democracy, in the full sense of the term.

## General Facts

The following information is taken from the most comprehensive and current source of statistics on Bangladesh—the CIA World Factbook.<sup>1</sup>

<i>Geography</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Economy</i>
<p>Area</p> <p>total: 144,000 sq km</p> <p>land: 133,910 sq km</p> <p>water: 10,090 sq km</p> <p>Land boundaries</p> <p>total: 4,246 km</p> <p>border countries: Burma 193 km, India 4,053 km</p> <p>Coastline: 580 km</p> <p>Natural resources</p> <p>natural gas, arable land, timber, coal</p>	<p>Total</p> <p>150,448,339 (July 2007 est.)</p> <p>Median age</p> <p>22.5 years</p> <p>Population growth rate</p> <p>2.056%</p> <p>Infant mortality rate</p> <p>59.12 deaths/1,000 live births</p> <p>Life expectancy at birth</p> <p>62.84 years</p> <p>Total fertility rate</p> <p>3.09 children born/woman</p> <p>HIV/AIDS</p> <p>less than 0.1% (2001 est.)</p> <p>Ethnic groups</p> <p>Bengali 98%,</p> <p>other 2% includes tribal groups, non-Bengali Muslims (1998)</p> <p>Religions</p> <p>Muslim 83%, Hindu 16%, other 1% (1998)</p> <p>Languages</p> <p>Bangla (official, also known as Bengali), English</p> <p>Literacy</p> <p>Total population: 43.1%</p> <p>male: 53.9%</p> <p>female: 31.8% (2003 est.)</p>	<p>GDP (purchasing power parity)</p> <p>\$336.7 billion (2006 est.)</p> <p>GDP (official exchange rate)</p> <p>\$69.34 billion</p> <p>GDP - real growth rate 6.6%</p> <p>GDP - per capita \$2,300</p> <p>GDP - composition by sector</p> <p><i>agriculture: 19.9%</i></p> <p><i>industry: 20.6%</i></p> <p><i>services: 59.5%</i></p> <p>Labor force 68 million</p> <p>Unemployment rate 2.5%</p> <p>Population below poverty line</p> <p>45% (2004 est.)</p> <p>Investment (gross fixed)</p> <p>24.9% of GDP</p> <p>Budget</p> <p><i>revenues: \$6.389 billion</i></p> <p><i>expenditures: \$8.694 billion</i></p> <p>Public debt 46.7% of GDP</p> <p>Agricultural products</p> <p>rice, jute, tea, wheat, sugarcane, potatoes, tobacco, pulses, oilseeds, spices, fruit; beef, milk, poultry</p> <p>Industries</p> <p>cotton textiles, jute, garments, tea processing, paper newsprint, cement, chemical fertilizer, light engineering, sugar</p> <p>Industrial production growth rate 7.2%</p>

<sup>1</sup> CIA. (2007, June). Bangladesh. *The World Factbook*. Retrieved 22 June, 2007, from <https://www.cia.gov/>

## II. Historical Context

Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, emerged as an independent nation in December 1971. Pakistan itself had been created on August 14, 1947, following the Partition of India which took place as British colonial forces left the sub-continent after almost ninety years of direct and one-hundred-and-eighty years of indirect rule. Pakistan was divided into two parts, separated by roughly 1,600 kilometers of Indian territory, with Islam only a tenuous link between the two. Eventually the importance of language and culture to East Pakistanis, a consideration not appreciated by the politically dominant West Pakistanis until it was too late, played a key role in promoting the independence movement.

Following independence—with its fragile and underdeveloped economic infrastructure under extreme duress, its law and order situation challenged by numerous well-armed contingents of unemployed former freedom fighters, and its impoverished population agitated by the unfulfilled promise of rising expectations—Bangladesh was given the unfortunate label of "basket case" by the then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.<sup>2</sup> The first national leader of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib), became popularly known as *Bangabandhu*, or friend of Bengal, during the Independence struggle; yet the future of Bangladesh envisioned by Mujib was uncertain and unstable. In 1975, Mujib, by then discredited for presiding over a bankrupt and corrupt regime, was assassinated along with most of his family. In the following years, a number of regimes rose and fell in the violent legacy of Bangladeshi politics. In its 36 years, Bangladesh has been under authoritarian and military rule for almost as long as it has been under a democratically elected government. The differences between the two types of rule have unfortunately not been as great as one might expect. Now the

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<sup>2</sup> This is interesting given that Bengal was known as the "breadbasket of India" under the Mughals, before exploitation severely depleted the resources of this, the richest in terms of agricultural land, province in the empire.

nation stands again at the brink of a precipice which may either strengthen its democracy or devolve into authoritarian rule.<sup>3</sup>

### 1905: Partition of Bengal

The partition of Bengal to form a Hindu dominated (West) Bengal and a Muslim dominated East Bengal was a precursor to the eventual partition of India and the administrative creation of a landmass that would become Bangladesh. East Bengal in 1905 was to encompass the Muslim Bengali speaking people and the population of neighboring Assam, presently a state in India. Lord Curzon, the Governor-General and Viceroy of India at the time, publicly claimed that the reasons for partition were purely administrative in nature; Bengal was becoming too large to manage. However, evidence from a letter that Curzon wrote to the Secretary of State for India in 1904 suggests a deeper objective:

“The Bengalis, who like to think of themselves as a nation, and who dream of a future when the English will have been turned out and a Bengali Babu will be installed in Government House, Calcutta, of course bitterly resent any disruption that will be likely to interfere with the realisation of this dream [such as Partition]. If we are weak enough to yield to their clamour now, we shall not be able to dismember or reduce Bengal again[.]”<sup>4</sup>

Partition was met with anger toward the British and riots between the Hindus and Muslims. The anti-partition agitation in Bengal was “unprecedented in the annals of the history of India under the British—an agitation carried on on the most constitutional line[sic].”<sup>5</sup> The main opposition came in Calcutta (now Kolkata), the main city of West Bengal and the capital of the British Raj; the British eventually annulled the Act in 1911 and moved their capital to Delhi in 1912. The *swadeshi* (nationalist) movement did not seek the reversal of the partition act but was “synchronous with the national awakening which the political movement in

<sup>3</sup> Blood, P. R. (1988). *A Country Study: Bangladesh*. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Retrieved May, 2007, from <http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/bdtoc.html/>

<sup>4</sup> Saxena, V. K. (Ed.). (1987). *The Partition of Bengal, 1905-1911: Select Documents*. Delhi: Kanishka Pub. House. p.4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20, Clipping from the English newspaper ‘Indian People’ Allahabad, 7<sup>th</sup> September, 1905.

Bengal had created.”<sup>6</sup> Old and young, literate and illiterate, and rich and poor alike started boycotting foreign products. The British had not expected the rage that followed the partition of Bengal; once unleashed, the force could not be stopped even with the eventual annulment of the act. They had believed that they could make the Muslims their allies; instead 1906 saw the creation of the Muslim League which would eventually call for the creation of Pakistan.

The popular uprising which followed the 1905 partition reflects the long history of social movement toward democracy which exists to this day in Bangladesh.

### **1947: Partition of India**

The political tumult in India during the late 1920s and the 1930s produced the first articulations of a separate state as an expression of Muslim consciousness. There was a proliferation of articles on the theme of Pakistan expressing the subjective conviction of nationhood, but there was no coordination of political efforts to achieve it and there was no reference to Bengal. In 1934, Mohammad Ali Jinnah took over the leadership of the Muslim League. He emphasized the "Two Nations" theory based on the conflicting ideas and conceptions of Hinduism and Islam. Jinnah's main counterpart representing the Indian National Congress was Jawaharlal Nehru.

By the late 1930s, Jinnah was convinced of the need for a unifying issue among Muslims, and the proposed state of Pakistan was the obvious answer. In its convention on March 23, 1940, in Lahore, the Muslim League resolved that the areas of Muslim majority in the northwest and the northeast of India should be grouped in autonomous and sovereign constituent states and that no independence plan without this provision would be acceptable to the Muslims. A federation was rejected and, though a confederation on common interests with the rest of India was envisaged, partition was predicated as the final goal. The Pakistan issue brought a unified goal to the Muslims and simplified the task of political agitation. It was no longer necessary to remain *yoked* to Hindus, and the amended wording of the Lahore Resolution issued

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50, a quote from Surendranath Banerjea paper *The Boycott and 'Swadeshi' Movement*.



in 1940 called for a "unified Pakistan." It would, however, be challenged by eastern Bengalis in later years.

Although self-government for India had not quite been accepted by the British, elections to provincial and central legislatures were ordered to slow the rapid decline of colonial power on the sub-continent. The Congress party and the Muslim League emerged from the 1946 election as the two dominant parties. The Muslim League's success in the election could be gauged from its sweep of 90 % of all Muslim seats in British India compared with a mere 4.5 % in the 1937 elections. At this juncture, the idea of a unified Bengal evaporated; the only choices were to join either India or Pakistan. Bengal was facing a greater crisis on its own as it lost an estimated 4 million people to famine in 1943-44.<sup>7</sup>

Subsequent disputes between the leaders of Congress and the Muslim League, however, led to mistrust and bitterness. Jinnah demanded parity for the Muslim League in the interim government and temporarily boycotted it when the demand was not met. When the viceroy proceeded to form an interim government without the Muslim League, Jinnah called for demonstrations. In August 1946, communal rioting on an unprecedented scale broke out, especially in Bengal and Bihar; the massacre of Muslims in Calcutta brought Gandhi to Bengal. His efforts calmed fears, but the rioting spread to other provinces and continued into the following year. Jinnah took the Muslim League into the government in an attempt to prevent additional communal violence, but disagreement among the ministers rendered the interim government ineffective and civil war seemed imminent.

In February 1947, Lord Louis Mountbatten was appointed viceroy and was given instructions to arrange for the transfer of power. Mountbatten was convinced that Congress would be willing to accept partition as the price for stopping bloodshed and that Jinnah was willing to accept a smaller Pakistan. Mountbatten obtained sanction from London for the drastic action he proposed and then persuaded Indian leaders to acquiesce in a general way to his plan.

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<sup>7</sup> Bharadwaj, P., Khwaja, A. I. & Mian, A. (2006, May). *The Big March: The Nature of Migratory Flows during the 1947 Partition of British India*. Retrieved May, 2007, from <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~akhwaja/papers/The%20Big%20March%20December%202005.pdf/>

On July 14, 1947, the British House of Commons passed the India Independence Act, by which two independent dominions were created on the subcontinent and the princely states were left to accede to either. Throughout the summer of 1947, as communal violence mounted and drought and floods racked the land, preparations for partition proceeded in Delhi. The preparations were inadequate. Jinnah and Nehru tried unsuccessfully to quell the passions that neither fully understood as law and order broke down in different parts of the country. Jinnah flew from Delhi to Karachi on August 7 and took office seven days later as the first governor general of the new Dominion of Pakistan.

What followed is one of the most dramatic exchanges of population in history as 3.3% of the total population of British India became displaced. While only 700,000 Muslims moved into East Pakistan, 2.9 million Hindus (7.03% of East Pakistan's total population) left for India.<sup>8</sup> This exodus left a vacuum in East Pakistan as the traditional commercial class consisted largely of Hindus. The mass displacement along with the unprecedented levels of communal violence ravaged the sub-continent.

### **1971: War of Liberation<sup>9</sup>**

The 1947 Partition of India was rushed and unplanned. Pakistan's boundaries were established hastily without adequate regard for the new nation's economic viability. Even the minimal requirements of a working central government—skilled personnel, equipment, and a capital city with government buildings—were missing. Until 1947, the East Wing of Pakistan had been heavily dependent on Hindu management. Many Hindu Bengalis left for Calcutta after partition, and their place, particularly in commerce, was taken mostly by Muslims who had migrated from the Indian state of Bihar or by West Pakistanis from Punjab.

Much of the investment in East Pakistan came from West Pakistani banks. Investment was concentrated in jute production at a time when international

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8

<sup>9</sup> Heavily drawn from the following authors for the rest of the section on historical context: Baxter, C. (1984) *Bangladesh: A New Nation in an Old Setting*. Boulder: Westview Press. Franda, M. F. (1982) *Bangladesh: The First Decade*. New Delhi: South Asian. Maniruzzaman, T. (1980) *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Books International. Mascarenhas, A. (1986). *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. O'Donnell, C. P. (1984). *Bangladesh: Biography of a Muslim Nation*. Boulder: Westview Press.

demand was decreasing. As banking and financing were generally controlled by West Pakistanis, discriminatory practices often resulted. Bengalis found themselves excluded from the managerial level and from skilled labor. West Pakistanis tended to favor Urdu-speaking Biharis, considering them to be less prone to labor agitation than the Bengalis.

Pakistan had a severe shortage of trained administrative personnel, as most members of the pre-independence Indian Civil Service were Hindus or Sikhs who opted to belong to India at partition. Rarer still were Muslim Bengalis who had any past administrative experience. As a result, high-level posts in Dhaka, including that of governor general, were usually filled by West Pakistanis or by refugees from India, mostly non-Bengali, who had adopted Pakistani citizenship.

One of the most divisive issues confronting Pakistan in its infancy was the question of what the official language of the new state was to be. Jinnah yielded to the demands of refugees from the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, who insisted that Urdu be Pakistan's official language. In East Pakistan, the dissatisfaction quickly turned to violence. The Bengalis of East Pakistan constituted a majority (an estimated 54%) of Pakistan's entire population. Their language, Bengali or Bangla, shares with Urdu a common Sanskritic-Persian ancestor, but the two languages have entirely different scripts and literary traditions.

The Language Movement, which culminated in violence on February 21, 1952, was the first sign of friction between the two wings of Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> The popular protests which occurred, despite the ban on public demonstrations imposed by the West Pakistan dominated government, are indicative of the non-submissive character of Bangladeshis. When Pakistan finally came under martial law under General Ayub Khan in 1958, many felt that autocratic rule was necessary in order to establish order in the country. Unfortunately, martial law continued until 1962 and Ayub purged a number of politicians and civil servants from the government and replaced them with army officers. Ayub called his regime a "revolution to clean up the mess of black marketing and corruption." The parallel between the situation in 1958,

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<sup>10</sup> Baxter, C. (1997). *Bangladesh: From a Nation to a State*. Westview Press. pp. 62 – 63.

and the many such imposition of autocratic rule that followed, with current politics in Bangladesh is what frightens the population.

Ayub formed a civilian government with a new draft of the Constitution in 1962 and made himself president. The Constitution made few concessions to Bengalis. Throughout the Ayub years, East Pakistan and West Pakistan grew further apart. The death of the head of the Awami League in 1963 gave Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, commonly known as Mujib, leadership of the political party representing the Bengali majority. Mujib, who had begun advocating the liberation of East Pakistan as early as 1956 and had been jailed in 1958 during the military coup, quickly and successfully brought the issue of East Pakistan's movement for autonomy to the forefront of the nation's politics.

The mishandling of humanitarian aid for the victims of a devastating cyclone that hit the Bay of Bengal in November 1970, killing 300,000 and affecting almost 4 million people in East Pakistan, further discredited the West-run Pakistan government.<sup>11</sup> The Awami League won power in a national election in 1971 but the government in West Pakistan refused to accept the result. Mujib declared independence and a nine-month civil war ensued in which more than a million Bangladeshis were killed.<sup>12</sup> India entered the war in December 1971 on the side of Bangladesh and Pakistan was forced to surrender its East Wing. Bangladesh, the land of Bengali speakers, gained its independence on December 16, 1971 with Mujib, now popularly known as *Bangabandhu*, as prime minister.

### **The Early Years of a New Nation**

On January 10, 1972, Mujib arrived in Dhaka to a rapturous welcome. Mujib first assumed the title of President but vacated that office two days later to become the Prime Minister. Mujib pushed through a new Constitution that was modeled on the Indian Constitution. The Constitution, adopted on November 4, 1972, stated that the new nation was to have a prime minister appointed by the president and approved by a single-house parliament. The

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<sup>11</sup> Emergency Disasters Database. (2007, May). *Bangladesh: Country Profile - Natural Disasters*. Retrieved May, 2007, from <http://www.em-dat.net/>

<sup>12</sup> Borstein, D. (1996). *A Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank and the Idea that is Helping the Poor to Change Their Lives*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited. p. 31. The attack of West Pakistanis on Bengalis is often referred to as a genocide although this label is debated.

Constitution enumerates a number of principles on which Bangladesh is to be governed, which include the four pillars of nationalism, socialism, secularism, and democracy. In the following years, however, Mujib discarded everything Bangladesh theoretically represented; that is, constitutionalism, freedom of speech, rule of law, the right to dissent, and equal opportunity of employment.

### *Mujibur Rahman – Bangabandhu*

In all fairness, Mujib had an extremely difficult task in delivering the prosperity people expected post-independence. The 1970 cyclone and the 1974 famine, along with the destruction incurred during the liberation war, deeply impacted the fabric of society in Bangladesh. Economic stability had to be established to create jobs for the now unemployed freedom fighters. Reforms were needed to revitalize the country's agricultural sector. Such tasks in a country traditionally poor to begin with put extreme pressure on the political system of the new nation. However, instead of mobilizing and unifying the country as he did during the liberation movement, Mujib exasperated the fractures appearing in the political arena.

Most Bangladeshis still revered the *Bangabandhu* at the time of the first national elections held in 1973. Mujib was assured of victory, and the Awami League won 282 out of 289 directly contested seats. After the election, the economic and security situations began to deteriorate rapidly, and Mujib's popularity suffered further as a result of what many Bangladeshis came to regard as his close alliance with India. Mujib's authoritarian personality and his paternalistic pronouncements to "my country" and "my people" were not sufficient to divert the people's attention from the miserable conditions of the country. Widespread flooding and famine created severe hardship, aggravated by growing law-and-order problems.

In January 1975, the Constitution was amended to make Mujib president for five years and to give him full executive powers. The next month, in a move that wiped out all opposition political parties, Mujib proclaimed Bangladesh a one-party state, effectively abolishing the parliamentary system, and requiring all civilian government personnel to join the party. The fundamental rights enumerated in the Constitution ceased to be observed, and Bangladesh, in its infancy, was transformed into a personal dictatorship.

On the morning of August 15, 1975, Mujib and several members of his family were murdered in a coup engineered by a group of young army officers; some of the officers in the "majors' plot" had a personal vendetta against Mujib, having earlier been dismissed from the army. In a wider sense, the disaffected officers and the several hundred troops they led represented the grievances of the professionals in the military over their subordination and Mujib's indifference to gross corruption by his political subordinates and family members. The familiar refrain of martial law imposed by necessity in order to fight corruption and reinstate order was heard again.

The assassins of Mujib arrested the three senior ranking officers in Mujib's cabinet but installed as president the fourth in charge, a long-time colleague of Mujib and minister of commerce, Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed. Mushtaque, a conservative member of the Awami League, was known to lean toward the West and to have been troubled by Mujib's close ties with India. In the context of the Cold War, these alliances took on heightened meaning. Mushtaque's role in the new regime was circumscribed by the majors, who even moved into the presidential palace with him. Mushtaque announced that parliamentary democracy would be restored by February 1977, and he lifted Mujib's ban on political parties. He instituted strong programs to reduce corrupt practices and to restore efficiency and public confidence in the government; again there are strong parallels with the military-backed interim government currently in power in Bangladesh. Mushtaque promised to dissolve the authoritarian powers that Mujib had invested in the office of the presidency, but the continuing unstable situation did not improve enough to permit a significant degree of liberalization. In order to keep Mujib supporters under control, Mushtaque declared himself chief martial law administrator and set up a number of tribunals that fell outside constitutional jurisdiction.

Despite the economic and political instability during the last years of the Mujib regime, the memory of the *Bangabandhu* evoked strong emotions among his loyalists. Many of these, especially former freedom fighters now in the army, were deeply resentful of the majors. One of these Mujib loyalists, Brigadier Khaled Musharraf, launched a successful coup on November 3, 1975. Chief Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem, who had

served Mujib in the Supreme Court, emerged as president with Musharraf serving as major general.

In a public display orchestrated to show his loyalty to the slain Mujib, Musharraf led a procession to Mujib's former residence. The reaction to Musharraf's obvious dedication to Mujibist ideology and the fear that he would renew the former leader's close ties with India precipitated the collapse of the new regime. On November 7, agitators of the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal, a leftist but decidedly anti-Soviet and anti-Indian movement, managed to incite troops at the Dhaka cantonment against Musharraf, who was killed in a firefight. President Sayem became chief martial law administrator, and the military service chiefs, most significantly the army's General Ziaur Rahman, commonly known as Zia, became deputy chief martial law administrators. Zia also took on the portfolios of finance, home affairs, industry, and information, as well as becoming the army chief of staff.

It was not long before Zia, with the backing of the military, supplanted the elderly and frail Sayem. Zia postponed the presidential elections and the parliamentary elections that Sayem had earlier promised and made himself chief marital law administrator in November 1976.

### *Ziaur Rahman*

Zia was a well-known figure who first emerged nationally during the independence struggle. His "Z Force" had been the first to announce the independence of Bangladesh from a captured radio station in Chittagong. Zia transformed himself into a popular political figure. Unlike Mujib, Zia recruited whatever talent he could and he did not discriminate, as Mujib had, against civil servants who had not fully participated in the freedom struggle.

Zia also tried to integrate the armed forces, giving repatriates a status appropriate to their qualifications and seniority. This angered some of the freedom fighters, who had rapidly reached high positions. Zia deftly dealt with the problem officers by sending them on diplomatic missions abroad. Zia made repatriate Major General Hussain Muhammad Ershad the deputy army chief of staff. Having consolidated his position in the army, Zia became president on April 21, 1977, when Sayem resigned on the grounds of

failing health. Zia now held the dominant positions in the country and seemed to be supported by a majority of Bangladeshis.

In May 1977, with his power base increasingly secure, Zia drew on his popularity to promote a nineteen-point political and economic program. Zia focused on the need to boost Bangladeshi production, especially in food and grain, and to integrate rural development through a variety of programs, of which population planning was the most important. He heeded the advice of international lending agencies and launched an ambitious rural development program in 1977, which included a highly visible and popular food-for-work program.

Fortified with his manifesto, Zia faced the electorate in a referendum on his continuance in office. The results of what Zia called his "exercise of the democratic franchise," showed that 88.5% of the electorate turned out and that 98.9% voted for Zia. Although some doubts were cast on how fairly the referendum was conducted, Zia was, nonetheless, a popular leader with an agenda most of the country endorsed. Zia consciously tried to change the military bearing of his government, eventually transferring most of the portfolios held by military officers to civilians. Continuing the process of giving his regime a non-military appearance, in June 1977 he chose as his vice president Supreme Court justice Abdus Sattar, a civilian who had long been involved in Bengali politics.

Zia altered the Constitution's ideological statement on the fundamental principles, in particular changing the Mujibist emphasis on secularism to invoking the name of Allah at the beginning of the Constitution. While distancing Bangladesh from India, Zia sought to improve ties with other Islamic nations. Throughout his regime, Zia pursued an active foreign policy, and the legacy of his efforts continued to bear fruit in the late 1980s. In 1980, Zia proposed a conference for the seven nations of the subcontinent (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) to discuss the prospects for regional cooperation in a number of fields. This initiative was successful in August 1983 when the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established.

After certain tensions culminated in a mutiny in Dhaka in 1977, Zia continued with his plans for political normalization, insisting on being called



president rather than major general and prohibiting his military colleagues from holding both cabinet and military positions. In April 1978, Zia announced that elections would be held to pave the way to democracy, adding that the Constitution would be amended to provide for an independent judiciary as well as a sovereign parliament. Zia lifted the ban on political parties. He was supported by a national front, whose main party was the Jatiyo Ganatantrik Dal (National Democratic Party). As the candidate of the Jatiyo Ganatantrik Dal-led Nationalist Front, Zia won overwhelmingly, taking 76.7% of the vote against the leader of the Freedom Fighters during the war. Shortly after, Zia expanded the Jatiyo Ganatantrik Dal to include major portions of the parties in the Nationalist Front. His new party was named the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and was headed by Sattar. Parliamentary elections followed in February 1979. After campaigning by Zia, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party won 207 of the 300 seats in Parliament with about 44% of the vote.

Zia was assassinated in Chittagong on May 30, 1981, in a plot allegedly masterminded by Major General Manzur, the army commander in Chittagong. Manzur had earlier been chief of the general staff and had been transferred to Chittagong in the aftermath of the October 1977 Dhaka mutiny. He was scheduled for a new transfer to a non-command position in Dhaka and was reportedly disappointed over this. The army, under its chief of staff, Major General Ershad, remained loyal to the Dhaka government and quickly put down the rebellion, killing Manzur. In the trials that followed, a sizable number of officers and enlisted men received the death penalty for their complicity.

After Zia's assassination, Vice President Sattar became acting president and, as the Constitution stipulated, called for new presidential elections within 180 days. Although there was some speculation that Zia's widow, Begum Khalida Ziaur Rahman, and Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, would be candidates, Sattar ran against a number of political unknowns in the November election and won the presidential election with two-thirds of the vote.

Sattar was an elderly man who his critics thought to be ineffective, but his greatest weakness, in the eyes of the military, was that he was a civilian. Although Zia had downplayed his own military background, given up his

position of army chief of staff, and adopted civilian dress and mannerisms, he maintained strong links with the armed services. Immediately following the 1981 election, Ershad pushed Sattar for a constitutional role for the military in the governance of the country. After initial resistance, Sattar, faced with the prospect of a coup, agreed to set up the National Security Council in January 1982 with the president, vice president, and prime minister representing the civilian side and the three service chiefs representing the military—again resembling calls for a NSC in current politics. In a last attempt to limit the influence of the military, Sattar relieved a number of military officers from duty in the government.

Sattar's decision to curtail military influence in the government provoked an immediate response from Ershad. On March 24, 1982, Ershad dismissed Sattar, dissolved the cabinet and the Parliament, and assumed full powers under martial law. Echoing the words of many past military leaders, Ershad announced that the military, as the only organized power in the nation, had been forced to take over until elections could be held.

Ershad almost immediately assumed the title of prime minister but to many Bangladeshis he was a usurper, one who overthrew a legitimately elected president and who would reverse the slow liberalization of Bangladeshi politics begun earlier by Zia. The events of March 1982 reflected much of the tumultuous history of the country.

#### *Hussain Muhammad Ershad*

On March 24, 1982, the army chief of staff, Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, seized control of the government in a military coup. He proclaimed martial law, made himself chief martial law administrator, and dismantled the structures of democratic government that the administration of the late president Zia had begun building during the previous five years. Ershad suspended the Constitution, disbanded Parliament, prohibited all political activities, and deprived the president, vice president, and cabinet ministers of their offices. Three days after the coup, the Supreme Court justice became interim president. Ershad became chief minister of a new cabinet, and by December 1983 he had officially taken over the presidency. He declared that he expected a return to democratic rule in about two years. In fact, martial law lasted until November 1986.

Ershad cited growing corruption and the inefficiency of the civilian government dominated by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as reasons for his coup. After the assassination of President Zia as part of a local military rebellion in Chittagong in May 1981, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party fell into conflicting factions that could not be controlled by Zia's successor, Sattar. Without Zia at the helm, the powerful leaders of the military distrusted Sattar's civilian government. Thus, because the major political forces in the country could not cooperate with each other, there was no resistance to Ershad's takeover. After establishing control of the country, he had three main priorities for bringing political chaos to an end and for governing Bangladesh. His goals were to act against corruption and reorganize the administrative apparatus in order to implement overdue reforms—uncannily similar to the goal stated by the current military-backed interim government—as well as to stand as a strong centralizing force while keeping his civilian opponents at bay, and placate the military so as to prevent further coup attempts. Through the mid-1980s Ershad proved remarkably capable at accomplishing these goals, and he became the longest ruling political leader in the history of independent Bangladesh.

Although the civilian court system continued to function, violations of martial law ordinances were handled by extra-constitutional martial law tribunals, where active-duty military officers met in secret sessions to try cases ranging from violations of press censorship to vaguely defined anti-social activities. Those convicted of political crimes had no right of appeal, and defendants were tried in absentia. Martial law deprived the Supreme Court of its jurisdiction over the protection of fundamental rights, and criticism of martial law was punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment. Ershad moved forcibly to end corruption and reorganize the government. Several hundred politicians, including six former cabinet ministers, were jailed on charges of corruption. Ershad announced that one of his highest priorities was a reorganization of the government in order to decentralize decision making and development projects. In order to outline procedures for this decentralization project, he appointed the Committee for Administrative Reorganization/Reforms, which instituted sweeping changes in local administration. The Land Reforms Ordinance of 1984 granted important rights to tenants for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, and a new

plan for the divestment of government industries promised to move the country away from socialism. In addition, Ershad built on Zia's earlier platform of advocating an increased role for Islam in the culture and politics of Bangladesh. These are the measures the citizens of Bangladesh are afraid will be implemented again if the present situation is allowed to devolve into autocratic rule.

Ershad had a clear political stage for about a year after the coup because of his severe repression of opposition parties and because of intense factional fighting within all major political groupings. By early 1983, however, a pattern of confrontational politics had emerged. This pattern dominated the public life of Bangladesh until the late 1980s. Paradoxically, the government's Islamic policies provided a common cause for the first large anti-Ershad demonstrations. Several of Ershad's speeches favoring a stronger Islamic movement provoked riots on university campuses, which escalated into battles between students and police in February 1983. Although the government imposed a curfew and closed the universities, the student movement stirred the opposition into more unified coalitions.

Dozens of political parties existed in Bangladesh during the 1980s, but the two major opposition parties to Ershad's rule were the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The Awami League, which originated in 1949 and emerged as preeminent at the beginning of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's era, gradually united around the leadership of Sheikh Hasina Wajed, Mujib's eldest daughter. A fifteen-party alliance led by the Awami League began to act in unison during 1983. The leadership of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party fell to Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of President Zia, and the party became the center of a seven-party alliance distinct from the one led by the Awami League. The two major alliances distrusted each other intensely, but they formed the heart of a larger thirty-two-party front, comprising socialist, communist, and Islamic groups, called the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy. This movement adopted a five-point program demanding an end to martial law, the restoration of fundamental rights, parliamentary elections, the release of political prisoners, and the trial of persons responsible for police brutality in the February student protests. The opposition alliances successfully engineered two

general strikes in November 1983, the second resulting in widespread violence and hundreds of casualties among demonstrators and security personnel.

Political events for the next several years revolved around attempts by the Ershad government to move from a military dictatorship to a civilian government with the cooperation of the political opposition. Ershad's program called for local elections at the union and subdistrict levels, followed by presidential and parliamentary elections, while a national party supporting the government would integrate all political groups in the same way the Bangladesh Nationalist Party had functioned during Zia's regime. Ershad relaxed the ban on political activities in January 1984 and repeatedly called for dialogue with opposition parties; but the major opposition alliances adamantly refused to cooperate while martial law remained in effect. The government held elections for union and municipal councils between December 1983 and February 1984, but repeated public demonstrations by opposition parties forced the cancellation of sub-district and parliamentary elections. A rising crescendo of violence and civil disobedience led Ershad to reimpose harsh martial law restrictions in March 1985 and put Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia, and other opposition leaders under house arrest. The government-sponsored party, Jatiya Party (National Party), had been formed in November 1983, but it had little chance to become organized before the new ban on political activity went into effect.

In May 1985, the government finally conducted subdistrict council elections. Keen local contests occurred amid widespread violence and claims of fraud by the opposition. After these elections, the government released Hasina, Khaleda Zia, and the other opposition leaders from house arrest, and on October 1 it canceled the ban on indoor meetings and rallies of political parties. By late 1985, the stage had been set for parliamentary elections. Despite constant opposition party pressure, Ershad's regime had used its control over the government and the military to maneuver the country toward civilian rule.

Because these moves satisfied some of the demands of the opposition, an eight-party alliance comprising the Awami League and some smaller parties agreed to participate in parliamentary elections. However, the seven-party alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party boycotted the May 1986 elections which, according to opposition parties, were marred by extensive

fraud, including overt support for Jatiya Party candidates by Ershad and other government officials, the theft of ballot boxes, and beatings of opposition party workers. The elections gave the Jatiya Party an absolute majority in Parliament. The Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami, and a number of smaller parties and independents won only a small portion of the seats.

With Parliament under his control, Ershad proceeded with plans for a presidential election. He resigned as army chief of staff in August 1986 but remained chief martial law administrator and commander in chief of the armed forces. He officially joined the Jatiya Party in September, was elected its chairman (a position which he occupies to the present day), and became the party's candidate for president.

In early 1987, it appeared that Ershad had outmaneuvered his opponents and made the transition to a civilian leadership. The opposition was in disarray and by the time the Awami League had decided to participate in Parliament in 1986, its coalition had shrunk from fifteen to eight parties. As a result, it had lost any opportunities it might have had for immediate cooperation with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and other parties, and it forfeited its claims to moral leadership in the fight against Ershad's regime. The rift between the Awami League and other opposition parties widened during the first half of 1987.

By the fall of 1987, political events had come to a head. Extensive flooding from heavy monsoon season rains led to widespread misery in the countryside and there was intense criticism of the government's relief efforts, similar to the situation in 1970 which served as a catalyst in the creation of Bangladesh. Hasina and Khaleda Zia met on October 28, signaling a new phase of cooperation between the two leading opposition coalitions. A liaison committee was formed to coordinate the moves of the opposition. Were such an alliance to form again now, it might lead Bangladesh out from this impasse to an improved democracy.

### **Democracy and the Rise of the Two Begums**

The struggle for democracy was still alive in Bangladesh and the single-party system of the 1970s and 1980s was unable to satisfy the varied political movements and interest groups of the nation. Opposition parties, although they represented conflicting views and were as unwilling as the ruling regime

to share power, remained a vital force that commanded the loyalties of a large proportion of the population, as it does to this day.

Socialist and communist parties, centrist parties representing the policies of defunct regimes, and conservative Islamic parties, each with a completely different vision of the path that Bangladesh should follow, united only in their opposition to the rule of President Hussain Muhammad Ershad, all vied for power in the late 1980s. Their refusal to participate in parliamentary politics under Ershad, who had seized power in 1982, relegated the opposition to illegal activities and demonstrations on campuses and in the streets, a situation that periodically brought economic life to a standstill in urban areas. The ineffectiveness and confrontational position of the opposition only strengthened the regime's hold over Parliament and the civil service and allowed the military to continue its strong autocratic rule.

Remarkably, the policies of Bangladesh's autocratic military rulers have been characterized by a commitment to democratic ideals and an adherence to the Constitution. Both Zia and Ershad seized power in the name of the Constitution, and sought to legitimize their positions by claiming that they brought stability to the country in order to guarantee democratic freedom.

Bangladesh pursued a neutralist policy in international relations in a continued effort to secure economic aid from every possible foreign source. Bangladesh in 1988 was one of the few countries in the world on good terms with both the United States and the Soviet Union and their allies and with China, the Islamic world, and most Third World nations. Bangladesh has played an active role in the United Nations (UN), the Non-aligned Movement, and other international groupings, and it was the driving force behind the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which offered promise for economic cooperation.

Ershad finally resigned in December 1990 due to mounting opposition both nationally and internationally. With the communist threat gone, Western countries were unconcerned about the instability that democracy might bring and no longer supported Ershad's autocratic rule. Elections in 1991 unfolded without much incident with 52% voter turnout. The center-right BNP won a

plurality<sup>13</sup> of seats and formed a government with support from the Islamic fundamentalist party Jamaat-I-Islami, with Khaleda Zia, widow of Ziaur Rahman, obtaining the post of prime minister. The electorate approved still more changes to the Constitution, formally re-creating a parliamentary system and returning governing power to the office of the prime minister, as in Bangladesh's original 1972 Constitution.

In March 1994, controversy over a parliamentary by-election, which the opposition claimed the government had rigged, led to an indefinite boycott of Parliament by the entire opposition. The opposition also began a program of repeated general strikes to press its demand that Khaleda Zia's government resign and a caretaker government supervise a general election. After another attempt at a negotiated settlement narrowly failed in late December 1994, the opposition resigned en masse from Parliament. The opposition then continued a campaign of marches, demonstrations, and strikes in an effort to force the government to resign. The opposition, including the Awami League's Sheikh Hasina, pledged to boycott national elections scheduled for February 15, 1996 which it did. As a result, in February, Khaleda Zia was re-elected by a landslide. In March 1996, following escalating political turmoil, the sitting Parliament enacted a constitutional amendment to allow a neutral caretaker government to assume power and conduct new parliamentary elections; former Chief Justice Mohammed Habibur Rahman was named Chief Adviser (a position equivalent to prime minister) in the interim government. New parliamentary elections were held in June 1996 and the Awami League won plurality and formed the government with support from the Jatiya Party led by deposed president Ershad; party leader Sheikh Hasina became prime minister.

Although international and domestic election observers found the June 1996 election free and fair, the BNP protested alleged vote rigging by the Awami League. Ultimately, however, the BNP party decided to join the new Parliament. The BNP soon charged that police and Awami League activists were engaged in large-scale harassment and jailing of opposition activists. At the end of 1996, the BNP staged a parliamentary walkout over this and other grievances but returned in January 1997 under a four-point agreement with

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<sup>13</sup> Meaning that the party did not win a clear majority but received a greater number of votes than any other party.



the ruling party. The BNP asserted that this agreement was never implemented and later staged another walkout in August 1997. The BNP returned to Parliament under another agreement in March 1998.

In June 1999, the BNP and other opposition parties again began to abstain from attending Parliament. Opposition parties staged an increasing number of nationwide general strikes, rising from 6 days of general strikes in 1997 to 27 days in 1999. A four-party opposition alliance formed at the beginning of 1999 announced that it would boycott parliamentary by-elections and local government elections unless the government took steps demanded by the opposition to ensure electoral fairness. The government did not take these steps, and the opposition subsequently boycotted all elections, including municipal council elections in February 1999, several parliamentary by-elections, and the Chittagong city corporation elections in January 2000.

In July 2001, the Awami League government stepped down to allow a caretaker government to preside over parliamentary elections. Political violence that had increased during the Awami League government's tenure continued to increase through the summer in the run up to the election. In August, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina agreed during a visit of former President Jimmy Carter to respect the results of the election, join Parliament whether they win or lose, forswear the use of hartals (violently enforced strikes) as political tools, and if successful in forming a government allow for a more meaningful role for the opposition in Parliament. The caretaker government was successful in containing the violence, which allowed a parliamentary general election to be successfully held on October 1, 2001.

The four-party alliance led by the BNP won an over two-thirds majority in Parliament. Begum Khaleda Zia was sworn in on October 10, 2001, as Prime Minister for the third time (first in 1991, second after the February 15, 1996 elections).

Despite her August 2001 pledge and all election monitoring groups declaring the election free and fair, Sheikh Hasina condemned the election, rejected the results, and boycotted Parliament. In 2002, however, she led her party legislators back to Parliament, but the Awami League again walked out in June 2003 to protest derogatory remarks about Hasina by a state minister and the allegedly partisan role of the parliamentary speaker. In June 2004, the

Awami League returned to Parliament without having had any of their demands (an apology to Sheikh Hasina and guarantees of a neutral speaker) met. They then attended Parliament irregularly before announcing a boycott of the entire June 2005 budget session.

On August 17, 2005, simultaneous blasts of improvised explosive devices in 63 out of 64 administrative districts targeted mainly government buildings and killed two persons. An extremist Islamist outfit named Jamiatul Mujahideen, Bangladesh (JMB) claimed responsibility for the blasts aimed to press home their demand for the replacement of the secular legal system with Islamic sharia courts. Subsequent attacks on the courts in several districts killed 28 people, including judges, lawyers, and police personnel guarding the courts. A government campaign against the Islamic extremists led to the arrest of hundreds of senior and mid-level JMB leaders. Six top JMB leaders were tried and sentenced to death for their role in the murder of two judges; another leader was tried and sentenced to death in absentia in the same case.

In February 2006, the Awami League returned to Parliament, raised demands for early elections, and requested significant changes in the electoral and caretaker government systems to stop alleged moves by the ruling coalition to rig the next election. The Awami League blames the ruling party for several high-profile attacks on opposition leaders, and asserts that the ruling party is bent on eliminating Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League as a viable force. The BNP and its allies accuse the Awami League of maligning Bangladesh at home and abroad out of jealousy over the government's performance on development and economic issues. Dialogue between the general secretaries of the main ruling and opposition parties failed to sort out the electoral reform issues. The two women are popularly known as the *Begums*, meaning madams, and their bickering has been a source of much frustration even within their parties.

### **III. Present Political Situation**

This section attempts to extract and expand on the key players in current Bangladeshi politics before discussing the current political stalemate. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to describe the framework for political activity in Bangladesh. Though this is by no means a comprehensive account, it should be sufficient in defining the political arena. Thus far, most of the actions taken since the declaration of the state of emergency have fallen within the bounds of democratic norms. Yet the population is increasingly fearful that what they see is the groundwork for military rule being laid out while adhering, however tenuously, to the country's Constitution.

#### **Constitutional Framework**

Bangladesh reverted to parliamentary democracy (as was stipulated in the country's original Constitution of 1972) following a constitutional amendment in 1991. The president, while chief of state, holds a largely ceremonial post; the real power is held by the prime minister, who is head of government. The president is elected by the legislature (Parliament) every five years. The president's circumscribed powers are substantially expanded during the tenure of a caretaker government. (Under the 13th Amendment, ratified by Parliament in March 1996, a caretaker government temporarily assumes power to oversee general elections after the dissolution of the Parliament. This was done because of political distrust among parties.) In the caretaker government, the president has control over the Ministry of Defense, the authority to declare a state of emergency, and the power to dismiss the chief adviser and other members of the caretaker government. Once elections have been held and a new government and Parliament are in place, the president's powers and position revert to their largely ceremonial role. The chief adviser and other advisers to the caretaker government must be appointed within 15 days from the day the current Parliament expires.

The prime minister is appointed by the president and must be a Member of Parliament (MP) whom the President feels commands the confidence of the majority of other MPs. The cabinet is composed of ministers selected by the prime minister and appointed by the president. At least 90% of the ministers must be MPs. The other 10% may be non-MP experts or "technocrats" who are not otherwise disqualified from being elected MPs. According to the Constitution, the president can dissolve Parliament upon the written request of the prime minister.

The legislature is a unicameral, 300-seat body. All of its members are elected by universal suffrage at least every five years. Parliament amended the Constitution in May 2004, making a provision for the addition of 45 seats to be reserved for women and to be distributed among political parties in proportion to their representation in Parliament.

Bangladesh's judiciary is a civil court system based on the British model; the highest court of appeal is the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. At the local government level, the country is divided into divisions, districts, subdistricts, unions, and villages. Local officials are elected at the union level and selected at the village level. All larger administrative units are run by members of the civil service.

The current military-backed interim government has taken measures to separate the judiciary from the executive in a move to curtail the abusive control usually wielded by the party in power. A Supreme Court ruling had been made in this respect in 1999, but subsequent governments delayed putting the ruling into effect. In 2001, the then caretaker government, which could have taken the necessary measures, was requested not to interfere by the Awami League and the BNP.<sup>14</sup>

### **Current Stalemate**

The 13th Amendment to the Constitution required the president to offer the position of the chief adviser to the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Justice K.M. Hasan, once the previous parliamentary session expired on October 28,

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<sup>14</sup> Mollah, M. A. H. (2005, April). Separation of Judiciary and Judicial Independence in Bangladesh. *United Nations Online Network in Public Administration and Finance*. Retrieved May, 2007, from <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN020065.pdf>. p. 5.

2006. The Awami League opposed Justice Hasan, alleging that he belonged to the ruling BNP and that the BNP government in 2004 amended the Constitution to extend the retirement age for the Supreme Court judges to make sure that Justice Hasan became the chief adviser during the next elections to help the BNP win the election. Justice Hasan declined the position, and after two days of violent protests, President Iajuddin Ahmed assumed the role of chief adviser to the caretaker government.

On January 3, 2007, the Awami League announced that it would boycott the January 22 parliamentary elections. The Awami League planned a series of country-wide general strikes and transportation blockades. The reasons presented were firstly, that the head of the caretaker government was pro-BNP and secondly, that they were denied access to the voter lists. Following Awami League's announcement, EU and UN election observers suspended their missions as Bangladesh was not meeting "international democratic standards."<sup>15</sup>

On January 11, 2007, President Iajuddin Ahmed declared a state of emergency under the Bangladesh Constitution, resigned as chief adviser, and indefinitely postponed parliamentary elections. On January 12, former Bangladesh Bank Governor and World Bank official, Fakhruddin Ahmed, was sworn in as the new chief adviser, and ten new advisers (ministers) have been appointed. Under emergency provisions, the government suspended certain fundamental rights of citizens as guaranteed by the Constitution and detained a large number of politicians and others on apparent suspicion of involvement in corruption and other crimes. The Electoral Commission, which is responsible for coordinating and rolling out the electoral process, has announced that elections will occur in late 2008. The Commission is charged with collaborating with members of the interim-government, political parties, legal experts, and civil society but is seen to be taking directions from the military who have placed their own men in positions of power within the Commission.

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<sup>15</sup> EUROPA. (2007, January 11). European Commission suspends its Election Observation Mission to Bangladesh. *Press Release*. Retrieved May, 2007, from <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/07/33&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en/>; United Nations Department of Public Information. (2007, January 10). United Nations says Bangladesh Political Crisis Jeopardized Electoral Legitimacy. *Press release UN Secretary General's office*. Retrieved May, 2007, from <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2007/sgsm10838.doc.htm/>

### Role of the Military

Many believe that the current interim government is only a puppet of the military, an idea which has been denied by Fakhruddin.<sup>16</sup> Regardless, the fact remains that it is the military which enabled the January 11 declaration of a state of emergency. 55,000 troops had already been deployed throughout the country in December 2006<sup>17</sup> and since the emergency went into effect, more than 280,000 people, including senior politicians and businessmen, have been arrested under corruption charges (at the time of writing).<sup>18</sup> The military have forcibly evicted the poor living in illegal dwellings and shut down black markets. Whether this was done at the behest of the caretaker government or not remains unclear but what is known is that the necessary dialogue among politicians, administrators, the judiciary, and civil society had not taken place before the measures were enforced. Furthermore, many believe that the stricter customs and tariff which affect import items have led to the increase in prices of essential goods.

The catalyst, however, which many believe discredited the present military-backed interim government, was the “minus two” plan in which the two former Prime Ministers, Hasina and Khaleda, were to be removed from Bangladesh’s political scene. Hasina was charged with extortion and murder charges<sup>19</sup> while she was away from the country visiting relatives. When Hasina prepared to return to Bangladesh to face the charges, the government instructed British Airways not to fly her as she was a threat to national security. This infuriated the head of the Awami League as well as her supporters and, unexpectedly, the move even angered Hasina’s usual opponents who claimed that the government had no right to deny her entry.

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<sup>16</sup> BBC. (2007, 9 May). Bangladesh leader: I am in charge. *BBC News Online*. Retrieved 9 May, 2007, from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6639019.stm/](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6639019.stm/)

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Council. (2007, March 7). Written statement as submitted by the Asian Legal Resource Center (ALRC). *General Assembly: Human Rights Council, Fourth session, Item 2 of the provisional agenda*. Retrieved May, 2007, from <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G07/115/23/PDF/G0711523.pdf?OpenElement/>

<sup>18</sup> The Daily Star. (2007, 11 July). 286,000 held since emergency declared. *The Daily Star Web Edition Vol. 5 Num 1106*. Retrieved 11 July, 2007, from <http://www.thedailystar.net/2007/07/11/d70711014422.htm/>

<sup>19</sup> Her supporters have been accused of killing four supporters of a rival political party during street violence in Dhaka, October 2006. It is not clear what role police say Hasina took in the killings. BBC. (2007, 11 April). Ex-Bangladesh PM in murder case. *BBC News Online*. Retrieved 11 April, 2007, from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6544835.stm/](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6544835.stm/)

Meanwhile, Khaleda had been placed under house arrest since the arrest of her eldest son under the charge of extortion. There were talks of exiling her to Saudi Arabia but the latter was unwilling to issue her a visa. These claims were subsequently denied by the military-backed interim government who blamed the media for circulating rumors despite the fact that the former prime minister had not left her house for a number of weeks. Since then, Hasina has returned to the country following intense national and international pressure and Khaleda has been allowed to leave her house, but many believe that the “minus two” plan has only temporarily been put aside.

As of mid-July 2007, the courts reject her bail and Hasina has been arrested after a raid on her house.<sup>20</sup> She is being held on corruption charges.<sup>21</sup> Khaleda’s movements are still restricted and she faces dissension within her party. The BNP general secretary is openly planning to remove her from her leadership position and has drawn support from other members of the party.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Other Key Factors*

At this juncture it is important to understand certain other key elements:

- The BNP could not afford to lose the elections as at December 2006 — many party members were involved in corrupt activities for which, as they knew, any new government might put them on trial for.
- Historically, other declarations of a state of emergency have led to the imposition of martial law.
- If members of the current government (and military) feel that the reforms they undertake will not be ratified by the next parliament thereby making their actions illegal and themselves susceptible to trial, they may feel constrained to stay in power. There is no clear exit strategy.

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<sup>20</sup> BBC. (2007, 16 July). Police arrest Bangladeshi ex-PM. *BBC News Online*. Retrieved 16 July, 2007, from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6900177.stm/](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6900177.stm/)

<sup>21</sup> The Daily Star. (2007, 17 July). Hasina arrested, sent to sub-jail. *The Daily Star Web Edition Vol. 5 Num 1112*. Retrieved 17 July, 2007, from <http://www.thedailystar.net/2007/07/17/d7071701011.htm/>

<sup>22</sup> Juberee, A. (2007, 15 July). BNP dissidents bent on early council session. *New Age*. Retrieved 15 July, 2007, from <http://www.newagebd.com/2007/jul/15/front.html#2/>

### **Political Parties**

The Bangladeshi political arena is clearly divided between the two main parties, the Awami League and the BNP. Many complain of the dynastic rule within both parties. Dissent is not tolerated within either party though, according to close collaborators, initially, Hasina and Khaleda were apparently both hesitant to take on their roles as party heads. In each case, the women had been asked by senior members of the respective parties to take on the responsibility in order to maintain party integrity following the assassinations of the previous leaders. Now, due to their status as daughter and wife of former national leaders, and prime ministers in their own right, they have achieved an almost sacred status within, and to a certain extent outside, their political parties. This may account for why some senior party members, especially in the Awami League, had initially supported the army's "minus two" plan to oust their leaders. By their own admission, these otherwise formidable men (and they are mostly men) were unable to air their grievances to Hasina without fear of reprisals and welcomed the opportunity for change.

Khaleda's case is slightly different as she has been grooming her sons to take over after her. Her most likely successor has been jailed on charges of extortion which he denies. Tarique Rahman, Khaleda's eldest son, was detained during the anti-corruption drive led by the current military-backed interim government; court proceedings have only just begun. In a new development, Khaleda, Tarique, and 26 members of the BNP cabinet were accused in June 2007 of murder in connection with the grenade attack on an Awami League rally that killed 24 people and injured many others in August 2004. But like so many of the other charges made by the current interim government, this case might simply disappear due to lack of evidence.

Despite the overwhelming popularity of the two main parties, they still need to form a coalition with smaller groups in order to assure a dominant majority in parliament. This need gives necessary leverage for the lesser parties to thrive. In the last polls in 2001, 54 parties contested in the elections.<sup>23</sup> However, the parties of most concern to Western countries are

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<sup>23</sup> Election Commission Secretariat, Bangladesh. (2007). *Some facts about Parliamentary Election October 01, 2001*. Retrieved June, 2007, from <http://www.ecs.gov.bd/election.php3?facts=1/>



the ones with religious, namely Islamic, affiliations. According to a recent study by the US Congressional Research Service, the parties of most concern are the radical Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), Jamaat ul-Mujahideen (JMB) which advocates the imposition of Islamic law, Islamic Oikya Jote, and the biggest Islamic party Jamaat-e-Islami (the last two are BNP coalition partners).<sup>24</sup> Even the Awami League, which has traditionally been extremely critical of Islamic parties, has recently signed an agreement with the fundamentalist Khelaphat-e-Majlis party in order to win more votes.

However, since the state of emergency has been declared these Islamic parties have maintained an extremely low profile. The military have hastened the trials of many captured Islamic radicals during this emergency period and executed those sentenced. Despite this obvious show of non-tolerance toward Islamic fundamentalists, the army could still eventually extend a cooperative hand to these religious parties. Traditionally there have been close ties between the military and the Islamic groups and the military has used religion to legitimize its power in the past. Interestingly, the army and the Islamic parties are seen as the least corrupt players on Bangladesh's political scene. They are known to reward on merit and abhor nepotism. Brotherhood is a strong concept in both the groups and it should be noted that women have no roles in either of their structures. The recent actions of the army in bringing justice to 'terrorists' may only be a temporary measure in order to improve their image in the eyes of the international community following the declaration of emergency; it does not preclude an eventual alliance with Islamic groups. Whereas the Awami League and the BNP are impatient to assume power, many in the Islamic parties, with a few more radically-minded exceptions, are ready to wait however long it takes to put Bangladesh on the 'right path'.

### **Foreign Involvement**

WESTERN COUNTRIES – The role of the international community has been overplayed in national circles. Aside from the withdrawal of election observers and verbal condemnation of the state of affairs in Bangladesh, the international community, though expecting a declaration of emergency, were

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<sup>24</sup> Vaughn, B. (2007, 31 January). *Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh. CRS Report for Congress.* Retrieved June, 2007, from [http://opencrs.cdt.org/rpts/RS22591\\_20070131.pdf/](http://opencrs.cdt.org/rpts/RS22591_20070131.pdf/)

not immediately involved in facilitating the change of government. Despite this fact, conspiracy theories are rife in the capital city. In reality, there is not very much the international community can do as even among themselves they have different agendas. Besides, Bangladesh is not as dependent on foreign aid anymore. Funds are requested often, but more out of habit than necessity—no need to spend one's own money if others are lining up to pay. Most recently, funds are being requested in order to reform the electoral process and include voter lists with photographs.

Due to Bangladesh's increasing financial independence, and perhaps partially due to recent political uncertainties, total foreign aid has dropped over the last year.<sup>25</sup> Donors have also been re-evaluating their funding methods. Administratively it is difficult to make small payments to individual NGOs and donors prefer making single large transfers. Thus many donors claim that instead of downsizing their funding, they have merely changed modality and included help in-kind in the form of capacity building programs (training) and technical assistance.

INDIA – India, surprisingly, has not expressed concern regarding the current political impasse in Bangladesh. It is seen to be in support of the military-backed caretaker government. In the recent SAARC summit in New Delhi in April 2007, the political situation in Bangladesh was not on the agenda, as stipulated under SAARC rules. Relations with India have actually improved since the emergency was declared in January. Despite India's putting up a fence on the border with Bangladesh in order to stop illegal migrants, it has been otherwise very helpful, going so far as to offer Bangladesh help with the shortage of electricity.<sup>26</sup> There have even been talks of reopening the direct train line connecting Kolkata in the state of West Bengal in India with Dhaka.

ARAB NATIONS – There has been a marked rise in the involvement of Arab countries in the socio-economic sectors of Bangladesh over the past decade. However, their impact on politics is much less clear. Support usually comes in the form of funding for mosques, *madrassas* (Islamic schools), and

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<sup>25</sup> Bangladesh Bank. (2007). *Foreign Aid and Govt's External Debt*. Retrieved June, 2007, from <http://www.bangladesh-bank.org/>

<sup>26</sup> The Independent. (2005, 30 November). Tata's investment to boost economy. *The Independent Internet Edition*. Retrieved June, 2007, from <http://www.independent-bangladesh.com/news/nov/30/30112005bs.htm#A1/>

the delivery of Islamic reading materials through religious non-government organizations and other popular channels. Many, however, claim that this money is often used for political purposes. Some investments are also made in the private sector, though the Middle East accounts for a very small portion of Bangladesh's total exports or imports. The sector in which Arab nations are the most visible is in the export of human labor from Bangladesh to the Arabian Peninsula. The most recent study available calculates that 96% of the total 185,500 migrants who left between January and September 2003 went to the Arab nations (with 67% going to Saudi Arabia)<sup>27</sup>. These Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East account for 66% of remittances from abroad, totaling US\$ 4.8 billion in 2006.<sup>28</sup> The remittances mostly enter the informal economy and it is difficult to calculate how much of it goes to foster Islamic ideology in the country. Globalization has improved the flow of information which in turn facilitates the spread of ideas picked up by the poor Bangladeshi migrants living in the Arab states. This may explain the recent rise in the use of *hijab* (covering for muslim women) and apparent popularity of Islamic parties within the country; however, the systematic research needed to establish whether globalization has made Bangladesh more susceptible to Islamic fundamentalism is not within the scope of this paper.

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<sup>27</sup> Siddiqui, T. (2005, November). *International Labour Migration from Bangladesh: A decent work perspective*. Retrieved 16 July, 2007, from [http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/integration/download/publicat/4\\_3\\_410\\_wp-66.pdf/](http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/integration/download/publicat/4_3_410_wp-66.pdf/)

<sup>28</sup> Asian Development Bank. (2006, December). *Bangladesh Quarterly Economic Update*. [Electronic Version]. Dhaka: Author.

## IV. Socio-Economic Backdrop

This section is a discourse on specific social and economic issues which either directly relate to or color the perception of the current political situation in Bangladesh. Of particular relevance are the legal and economic sectors of society. As the question of Islam was touched upon in the previous section, it will not be re-introduced here although it is clearly an important part of the social fabric of Bangladesh.

### Rule of Law

- RAB
- Arrests on corruption charges

Of concern is the rise in popularity of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a paramilitary outfit set-up post 9/11 under the pretext of controlling the rise of Islamic terrorism in Bangladesh. While its presence resulted in some decline in terrorist activities, The RAB fast became the hitman for whichever government that was in power. RAB officers even dress in a style reminiscent of rebel militia forces in Africa: outfitted all in black with bandanas and sun-glasses. The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions calls on the government to “stop the Rapid Action Battalion and other elite security forces from using murder as a policing technique.”<sup>29</sup> According to their own website, the RAB has killed 441 persons during “exchange of fire” as of June 8, 2007.<sup>30</sup> The RAB may become even more dangerous with the advent of martial law and some efforts must be made to curb their power.

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<sup>29</sup> United Nations Office at Geneva. (2007, March 28). Press Release. Retrieved April, 2007, from [http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news\\_media.nsf/\(httpNewsByYear\\_en\)/D7F1FoD552E50676C12572AC005D6E33?OpenDocument/](http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/(httpNewsByYear_en)/D7F1FoD552E50676C12572AC005D6E33?OpenDocument/)

<sup>30</sup> Rapid Action Battalion. (2007). *Summary of total Arrested Persons Till 08 June 2007*. Retrieved July, 2007, from <http://www.rab.gov.bd/arrestnother.html/>

Meanwhile, as mentioned earlier, as many as 286,000 people have been arrested on corruption charges since the state of emergency was declared on January 11, but the manner in which this has been done seems arbitrary.<sup>31</sup> The main intent of these arrests are seen by many to be the destabilization of the Awami League and the BNP rather than a true effort to tackle the corruption problem in Bangladesh, which has been consistently at the top of the lists of the most corrupt countries compiled by Transparency International.

### Human Rights

- Random arrests
- Eviction of slum dwellers

The greatest failing of the military-backed interim government has been its inability to work with civil society in making a real concerted effort toward fighting corruption. There is a general feeling of disappointment among the many that had actually supported the new interim government, and instead of the expected decline in human rights violations, this government is seen to be adding to them. In the latest of a string of unjustified arrests, a Daily Star reporter has been taken into custody. Certain slums have been demolished without proper procedure, leaving thousands of extremely poor people homeless. According to civil law, alternative arrangements have to be made before such drastic action is taken. It must be noted, however, that in recent weeks, months after the initial demolitions, the government has taken positive steps toward rehabilitating evicted slum dwellers. Meanwhile the general public feel unable to voice their grievances under the state of emergency and given the ban on all political activities. Whereas the rights of women and ethnic minorities have been relatively unaffected by recent events in Bangladesh, much work remains to be done in order to bring equality to the peoples of Bangladesh regardless of their ethnicity, religious beliefs, and gender. Such a goal will not be served by the imposition of martial law.

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<sup>31</sup> The Daily Star. (2007, 11 July). 286,000 held since emergency declared. *The Daily Star Web Edition Vol. 5 Num 1106*. Retrieved 11 July, 2007, from <http://www.thedailystar.net/2007/07/11/d70711014422.htm/>

### **Positive Social Trends**

- Universal schooling
- Gender parity in schools
- Population stabilizing

Though people may not agree on the actual figures, there is no doubt that there is an overwhelming positive trend in Bangladesh's development. Close to 100% of children are enrolled in primary schooling with a 30% drop-out rate according to the government (though the real figure may be closer to 50%). Bangladesh is also the only country in Asia that has gender parity in its secondary schools due to an innovative scholarship scheme. This is a huge step in ensuring gender equality in future generations.

The population of the country is also stabilizing with the population predicted to peak at 250 million by around 2085.<sup>32</sup> This will help Bangladesh tackle the environmental problems the country is likely to face in coming years. Many of the positive social trends can be attributed to an active NGO (non-governmental organization) sector which has for years been addressing the needs of the population—something normally undertaken by a country's government. Interestingly, foreigners seem more optimistic about Bangladesh's future than Bangladeshis themselves. There is a fear, especially among the older generation, that things will go wrong. However, the predominant social and economic trends since the creation of the country have only been positive despite chronic political instability.

### **State of the Economy**

According to the Central Bank of Bangladesh, the country has undergone rapid structural transformation from a mainly feudal agrarian base toward manufacturing and services. The contribution of the agricultural sector to GDP has dwindled from 50 percent in 1972-73 to around 20 percent in 1999-2000. The agricultural sector is, however, still the main employment provider with rice and jute constituting the primary crops. Industrial production growth has averaged more than 6% over the last 5 years. The export sector

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<sup>32</sup> United Nations Population Fund. (2005, June). *Executive Board Annual session 2005*. Retrieved May, 2007, from <http://www.unfpa.org/exbrd/2005/annualsession/bangladesh-final-draft.pdf/>

has been the engine of industrial growth, with ready-made garments being the main export item. The sector has grown at an average of 30% over the last 5 years. Primary products comprise less than 10% of the country's exports, the bulk being made up of manufactured products.

Although improving, infrastructure to support transportation, communications, and power supply is poorly developed. Bangladesh is limited in its reserves of coal and oil, and its industrial base is weak. However, the country's vast human resource base, rich agricultural land, relatively abundant water, and substantial reserves of natural gas are a great asset. Bangladesh has also been making progress in the pharmaceuticals sector. Thus far producing cheaper versions of international brands for the internal market, there are hopes that patent laws will change in order to allow the export of medicine to other developing countries.

#### *Effect of Postponed Elections on the Economy*

- Black market
- Rise in prices
- Expected growth

Investment in Bangladesh has already taken a hit in the first quarter of 2007 due to political uncertainty.<sup>33</sup> The Board of Investment received proposals from foreign investors to undertake projects valued at US \$83.32 million in the first three months of the calendar year, compared with the US\$194 million received during the same period in 2006. The black market has also been targeted by the interim government's anti-corruption campaign, slowing down economic growth. But the business community expects these setbacks to be temporary, which long-term benefits outweigh if the current interim government does indeed manage to address the issue of the widespread corruption that has become the norm in Bangladesh.

Of greater concern has been the steady rise in the prices of essential goods. This has been attributed to stricter controls of imports. However, the rise has not stabilized and is affecting a large portion of the population, for many of whom 70% of their wages go on buying food. This rise is of more concern to

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<sup>33</sup> Uddin, M. K. (2007, 28 April). FDI proposals fall 132.84pc in 2007. *New Age*. Retrieved May, 2007, from <http://www.newagebd.com/2007/apr/28/busi.html/>

most of the population than the current suspension of democratic rights. Regrettably, the government has so far been unable to address this issue. Prices in India have also risen so this problem may not have any immediate solutions.

Economic growth will also be affected by current politics but given the extraordinary expansion of Bangladesh's market in recent years, a lower rate might help the country stabilize. Indeed, some claim that the economic sector had been growing too quickly, giving the rest of the country no scope to adjust. In the long term, Bangladesh's economy has never been overly affected by governance failures. Entrepreneurs have been able to do business while keeping whichever power in office happy. The campaign against corruption, if done properly, will only help the economy in the long-run.



## V. Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, it was mentioned that certain key factors contributing to the current political situation would be identified. While this has been done throughout the narrative, the next section will be devoted to reassembling the most important components and discussing the elements that could affect the outcome of the present impasse. The final section will reflect on the central objective of this paper: whether Bangladesh will devolve anew into an autocratic state or continue toward becoming a real democracy—one not only in form but in principle and practice.

### Key Factors

The crucial issue remains whether the military will opt for the **imposition of martial law** if things do not work out the way they wish. It is easy to see why, given the country's history, the Bangladeshis expect the worst outcome from the current situation. However, certain key factors have changed. For one, the Cold War is over and the Western powers are not as concerned with the ideological inclinations of the governing body in Bangladesh. Religious inclinations have now become a greater factor. Secondly, the Bangladesh military is one of the largest contributors to global UN peacekeeping forces,<sup>34</sup> a privilege it intends to keep and thus is unwilling to tarnish its reputation by declaring martial law. Bangladesh does not have the geo-political importance of Pakistan (being as it is on the border of Afghanistan), and thus will not obtain US support if the army were to take over. Furthermore, Bangladesh is a pre-dominantly homogeneous society which ought to be a stabilizing force for the country.

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<sup>34</sup> With troop contributions standing at 9,675 as of March 2007 it is second only to Pakistan. United Nations. (2007). Monthly Summary of Contributions: (Military Observers, Police, and Troops). *Contributors to United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*. Retrieved May, 2007, from [http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/2007/marcho7\\_1.pdf/](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/2007/marcho7_1.pdf/)

Certain measures at this stage might further hinder the possibility of military rule.

1. *Greater dialogue between the Awami League and the BNP* with their leaders agreeing to work with the present military-backed interim government. Unfortunately, at the moment it seems unlikely as in a recent interview Hasina stated that while she was willing to cooperate with the caretaker government, she would never work “with thieves again.”

“Why should I [Hasina] collaborate with those who have the stink of corruption all over them? As it is we are being bracketed with these corrupt, power-hungry people. Why should we take responsibility for them? And there is an ideological issue as well. Their misdeeds and machinations have brought on this crisis for our democracy. They are not agents of a truly democratic order.”<sup>35</sup>

2. The promise from political parties to ratify the measures taken by the current military-backed interim government. If the present military and civilian leaders feel that they will be made to pay for their actions under the Emergency, they may take drastic action to stay in power. The government needs an *exit strategy*.
3. *Civil society largely recognizes that there is a need to cooperate* with the interim government to convict those accused of corruption. They however must realize that just because a few innocent people were also charged, the real goal should not be forgotten amidst the concerns of human rights violations.
4. As regards the key requirement of electoral reforms, there are increasing indications of public understanding that while the political parties must understandably put pressure on the caretaker government to hold elections as soon as possible, the Electoral Commission must be given the necessary time to usher in the reforms and put in place the much talked about voter identification cards. There is also a real

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<sup>35</sup> Khan, Z. A. (2007, 6 May). Interview with Sheikh Hasina. *New Age Op-Ed*. Retrieved 6 May, 2007, from <http://www.newagebd.com/2007/may/06/oped.html/>

need for the reform of some other key institutions, such as the judiciary—where the work for its separation from the executive branch has just begun—the public service commission, the police, the education sector, the market economy to curb spiraling prices mentioned earlier etc. All these will require the time that the caretaker government has requested. Furthermore, there is a growing realization that if political parties unnecessarily hassle the interim government, the military might be pushed to place stricter restrictions on democratic rights. The caretaker government needs *support for an extended mandate* beyond the stipulated 90 days, provided their intent remains above suspicion.

5. There is also a growing recognition that *while the RAB may be necessary to some extent, measures to reign in its excesses are essential*. Both national and international support should be more considered as RAB forces may take advantage of the uncertain situation existing in the country to carry out out more extra-judicial activity. Closer monitoring of this group by the civilian elements in government is necessary and would minimize the possibility of a real military coup. The focus should instead be on strengthening the traditional law enforcement bodies: Bangladesh peacekeeping troops are known for their training programs and they should be used for local policing, while RAB activity should be limited and streamlined

The issue of dynastic politics is overplayed. Instead the focus should be on encouraging **democratic practices within the parties themselves**. Sadly, only the military and Islamic parties are seen to be truly merit based. Some members of the Awami League and the BNP supported the “minus two” plan as Khaleda and Hasina have developed personality cults around them which makes it difficult to criticize or suggest change. The parties have to be restructured internally; outside interference, as has been seen, will only aggravate party members. In fact since the “minus two” plan was first put into effect, Bangladesh has seen an increase in the popularity of both the women leaders. The country is clearly divided between the Awami League and the BNP. Although there is much talk of wanting an alternative, when Grameen Bank founder Muhammed Yunus floated his new political party he was met with a decidedly lukewarm response and has since retreated from

the political arena. This might also be the right time to consider changing from a majoritarian system of representation to a proportional one. Such a change could relax the Awami League's and BNP's grip on Bangladesh and force restructuring within the parties.

The immediate concerns of most of the people of Bangladesh appear to center around the **lack of electricity and increase in food prices**. These two problems will only get worse in the foreseeable future. The state is far behind in providing electrical support in a country whose economy is now largely industrial. With its natural gas resources, Bangladesh ought to be able to satisfy national requirements but only 60% of current needs are met. A concerted effort needs to be made to address the issue and strengthen the country's infrastructure.

On its part, **the international community ought to try and find common ground and cooperate with one another**. For the moment this important element in Bangladesh politics is divided between the 'Western' (in quotes because Australia belongs in this group) liberal, democratic nations, the Arab nations, and India. There are a host of other players among which China might become more and more visible but for now these are not seen to have much influence in Bangladeshi politics. The United Nations and the World Bank, two key institutions channeling donor funds, are usually perceived as the operational arm of the Western countries. The number of conspiracy theories which emerged during the course of researching this report is testament to the mistrust of foreign involvement. These fears would be allayed by greater transparency and cooperation.

One thing is for certain, as in the past, Bangladeshis will be able to deal with the current political situation with minimal foreign involvement. Although far from being an ideal state, Bangladesh has an active civil society, though its base could be broader, and demanding populace. The necessary dialogues, workshops, and state-building activities are already taking place. The question is not *whether* Bangladesh will become a true democracy, but rather *when*.

### **Democracy in Bangladesh**

In 1991, Bangladesh reverted back to a more democratic system from an autocratic regime. Unfortunately, since then, the country has been

democratic in name only; in practice the method of governance has been more by muscle and money than by truly democratic means. As Alexis de Tocqueville writes in his seminal work *Democracy in America*, “those who consider universal suffrage as a guarantee of the excellence of the resulting choice suffer under a complete delusion.”<sup>36</sup> To date the elected politicians of Bangladesh have not proven themselves worthy of the trust placed in them by those who voted them into power. In fact, governance under military rule was not so different from that under so-called democratic rule. The military leaders of Bangladesh tried to meet the basic requirements of democracy by creating their own political parties, participating in parliamentary sessions, and even staging elections. But the mere existence of an electoral process and parliament themselves do not create a truly democratic state.

The opportunity has again presented itself to Bangladesh and it is hoped that this time Bangladesh will really be able to establish true democracy. The Electoral Commission is not only preparing for elections but reforming the political parties and their practices. Other critical reforms mentioned above are being put in place. If all these changes are properly implemented, then the state of emergency declared in Bangladesh on January 11, 2007 could turn out to be a turning point in the history of Bangladesh.

In fact January 11 itself could be taken a sign of a strengthening democracy. When previously faced with this type of an impasse, the governing political party usually rallied on using brute force. However, on this occasion, whether due to international influence or sheer popular frustration, the citizens declared that they would not accept mock elections with doctored results. Had an emergency not been declared and had the elections gone ahead, there would have probably been more violence and the further fracturing of Bangladesh politics; that it has been avoided is in itself an indication of the awareness of the people of Bangladesh of the limits of what is acceptable as democratic.

Many Bangladeshis, despite their fears, are fervently hoping that this interim government will truly usher in a democratic state in which the government and administration are accountable to the people in the truest sense of the term and the rule of law is firmly established. This will ensure that politics

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<sup>36</sup> Tocqueville, A. D. (1988). *Democracy in America* (G. Lawrence, Trans.). (19th ed.). New York: HarperPerennial. (Original work published 1848). p. 199.

in Bangladesh will be unable to revert to what it has been in the past. This will require time, but with cooperation and patience from all sectors of Bangladeshi society, a return to military rule will no longer be a viable option. Democracy will be established, both in principle and in practice. Bangladesh has all the possibilities of living up to its reputation as a moderate Islamic state. Even this optimistic assessment must be viewed in the knowledge that also in 1971 people had believed that they were going to get a country according to their desired expectations. Hopefully, since then, many lessons have been learnt.

## Appendix

This alphabetical list is a glossary of important actors (political, economic, and military) in Bangladesh, and is compiled to enable newcomers to follow at least some of the news coverage concerning Bangladeshi politics.

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<b>Fakhruddin Ahmed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Head of current interim government</li><li>• Former Governor of the Bangladesh Bank</li></ul>
<b>Iajuddin Ahmed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Former President</li><li>• Head of October 2006 - January 2007 interim government</li><li>• Declared the state of emergency on January 11, 2007</li></ul>
<b>Moeen U Ahmed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Present Army Chief</li></ul>
<b>Salehuddin Ahmed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Governor of the Bangladesh Bank (Central Bank)</li></ul>
<b>Ruhul Amin</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Chief justice at the Supreme Court</li></ul>
<b>Bangla Bhai</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Former military commander of the radical pseudo-Islamist organization Jagrata</li><li>• Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB)</li><li>• Executed May 2007</li></ul>
<b>Debapriya Bhattacharya</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue</li></ul>

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<b>Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Party secretary general for BNP</li> <li>• Wants to oust Khaleda from her leadership position</li> </ul>
<b>Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chairman for the Anti-Corruption Commission</li> </ul>
<b>Ershad</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Former President</li> <li>• Head of the Jatiya Party</li> </ul>
<b>Sheikh Hasina</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• President of the Awami League</li> <li>• Daughter of Bangladesh's first leader, Mujibur Rahman (Bangabandhu)</li> <li>• Prime Minister between 1996 - 2001</li> </ul>
<b>Shamsul Huda</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief election commissioner</li> </ul>
<b>Matiur Rahman Nizami</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leader of the main Islamic party, Jamaat-i-Islami, which is in coalition with the BNP</li> </ul>
<b>Salman Rahman</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief executive officer of Beximco, the largest private sector industrial conglomerate in Bangladesh</li> <li>• Arrested on corruption charges</li> </ul>
<b>Tarique Rahman</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Khaleda's eldest son</li> <li>• Being held on extortion charges</li> </ul>
<b>Jamiruddin Sircar</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaker of Parliament (Jatiya Sangsad)</li> </ul>



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**Muhammed Yunus**

- Founder of Grameen Bank
- Winner of 2006 Nobel Peace Prize
- Attempted to float a party, Nagorik Shakti, post-emergency but did not garner enough support

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**Khaleda Zia**

- Bangladesh National Party (BNP) chairperson
  - Widow of General Ziaur Rahman, Prime Minister between 1991-1996 & 2001- 2006
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## About the Author

Saira Wolvén holds a BA in Political Science and BS in Industrial Engineering from Columbia University in the City of New York. Before starting with the Asia Program at the Institute for Security and Development Policy, she worked for SIDA in Stockholm and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in DR Congo. Currently, she is pursuing an MBA from INSEAD, France.