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Bangladesh at 50: The Transformation of a Nation

As the country reaches its golden jubilee, it stands at a crossroads.

By **Ali Riaz** and **Saimum Parvez**

When Bangladesh emerged as an independent state after experiencing a genocide in 1971, it drew little international attention; for decades it made it into the news cycle for natural disasters, poverty, military coups, political violence, and corruption. In the initial years of its existence the country was described as an international “basket case” and a test case for development. But as it celebrates its 50th anniversary in March,

Bangladesh can hardly be ignored, thanks to the growing geopolitical significance of the country at a time when South Asia has become the site of rivalry between aspirant global hegemon China and regional power India. Bangladesh also warrants attention because of its remarkable economic growth in the past few decades, and successes in social indicators – often eclipsing its neighbors.

But these positive developments are marred with ongoing democratic backsliding characterized by repeatedly rigged elections, dwindling freedom of speech, and a growing penchant for authoritarianism in the government. Although the democratic aspirations of the people of then-East Pakistan led to the war of independence and the founding of the country with a promise of equality, human dignity, and social justice enshrined in the declaration of independence, the reality of the past five decades has been far from those ideals.

Instead of democratic institutional building, prolonged military rule and acrimony between two major parties – the Bangladesh Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party – have hindered sustainable growth and prevented the country from achieving its full potential. The salience of religion in politics, due to the expedient politics of the major political parties, a search for moral legitimacy by those who want to cling on to power, and the social changes experienced by the nation, cannot be disregarded.

A Growing Geopolitical Significance

Bangladesh is often called an India-locked country; a victim of geography, it is surrounded by India on three sides. It also has a small border with Myanmar. Due to its geographical position, squeezed between India and Myanmar, and nominal size, it is often considered a small country with little or no policy importance. However, this lack of significance is surprising as the geographical location of Bangladesh offers myriad possibilities. With practical and independent foreign policy initiatives, its location, especially the southward opening to the Bay of Bengal and proximity to a rising global power – China – could make Bangladesh the hub of the Indo-Pacific economic corridor. The

country could be a node connecting Central and South Asia to Southeast Asia and China.

As China's ambitions to become a global power were manifesting, it began investing large amounts in various projects. Bangladesh signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China in 2016 that pledged a total sum of \$24 billion, which is Bangladesh's most extensive foreign credit line in its history. Just months before the MoU, Bangladesh sealed a \$2 billion agreement with India to implement development projects in Bangladesh.

Although India is closer to the incumbent Bangladeshi government, at least politically, Bangladesh continues to keep the door open for China. The difference between Chinese and Indian policy toward Bangladesh lies in the degree of intention to influence Bangladesh's domestic politics. Over the years, India has rather overtly backed up the ruling political party, the Awami League, thus retaining its semi-authoritarian regime. The unequivocal support of Indian diplomats and officials to the Awami League before the highly controversial 2014 and 2018 elections reflected India's preference. In general, India's perceived interference in domestic politics and close relationship with the Awami League over the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has aroused strong anti-India sentiment among a large segment of Bangladeshis. In contrast, China successfully maintained relations with both the Awami League and the opposition BNP, and attained bipartisan support in return. A joint forum – the Bangladesh-China Silk Road Forum – was created in 2019, where the major political parties, the Awami League, BNP, and the leftists, came together to support China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

There are other motivations for Bangladesh's semi-authoritarian regime to maintain strong relations with China. In recent times, relations with the West, especially the United States, have encountered difficulties because of the Bangladeshi government's poor human rights track record, the country's shrinking democratic space, and abject conditions in the readymade garment sector. Recently, the United Nations called for investigations by proper authorities into allegations of high-profile crimes revealed in an investigative documentary by Al-Jazeera. China's relationship

works as an alternative option for the incumbent government of Bangladesh in case its Western allies go against the government for human rights and other liberal democratic issues.

On the other hand, China already has a close ally in the subcontinent: Pakistan. Building strong relations with Bangladesh would help China build a strong foothold on both sides of India and in the Indian Ocean. Not surprisingly, India has expressed its concern over China's intention of beefing up Bangladesh-China relations. So far, the Bangladesh government has played a balancing game to please both Asian giants. However, this is a very delicate game to play. A failure to maintain balanced ties with the two rivals may result in an adversarial relationship with one or the other, similar to the classic international relations concept of strategic triangles. Thus, Bangladesh's foreign policy success in the decades ahead will depend on how adroitly and for how long Bangladesh can continue walking the tightrope.

In this geopolitical equation, the United States seems largely absent, although Washington and Dhaka have remained close through economic and security cooperation, particularly since 2001. The United States is Bangladesh's largest export market, and U.S. investment has increased remarkably in recent years. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two countries has fluctuated since independence. In the early years Bangladesh's foreign policy was tilted toward the Indo-Soviet alliance, thus keeping the U.S. at arm's length. The situation changed after the 1975 coup; under then-General Ziaur Rahman's government Bangladesh's foreign policy orientation shifted toward the West. This orientation continued under military regimes and civilian elected governments since 1991. In some ways, the current U.S. policy toward Bangladesh was shaped by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority nation, attracted U.S. counterterrorism interest. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit in 2012 gained media attention when she focused on Bangladesh's possible significance in an Indo-Pacific economic corridor. The U.S. ambassador to Bangladesh from 2011 to 2015, Dan Mozena, also reiterated the possibility of Bangladesh becoming a significant hub that could link Indo-Pacific countries.

In January 2021, just before leaving office, the Trump administration declassified its “United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific.” The main goal of the strategy is to ensure continued dominance over China. To ensure that, U.S. strategy relies on accelerating India’s rise as an offset to China. The declassified report clearly states that the U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific is mainly based on India, that India should take a leading role in South Asia and maintain Indian Ocean security. To ensure Indian preeminence, the U.S. strategy aims to accelerate India’s rise as a military power and make it a major defense partner. This approach, built on making India a countervailing force to China in the region, has serious drawbacks as it provides India a blank check in the region. India’s actions may not be consistent with the U.S. position on issues related to Bangladesh. That divergence emerged in 2013 in advance of the January 2014 general election in Bangladesh. While the United States insisted on an inclusive election, India offered unqualified support to the Awami League, which proceeded with an election boycotted by almost all opposition parties.

As Trump’s policies to counter China in the Indo-Pacific region largely received bipartisan support, it is unlikely that the Biden administration will bring about a dramatic change, although India’s democratic credentials are now in free fall under the Modi government. Whether the U.S. ignores the regional dynamics and different contexts in emerging partner countries will influence the trajectory of the relationship. As anti-Indian sentiment in Bangladesh is on the rise due to a number of unresolved issues, including water sharing, the killing of Bangladeshi citizens by Indian border guards, and the anti-Bangladeshi rhetoric of the BJP leadership, franchising Bangladesh policy to Delhi is likely to be counterproductive. The Biden administration should formulate its policy targeting local contexts, keeping in mind domestic politics, and the prevailing sociopolitical culture, rather than accelerating Indian dominance over so-called small partners. Besides strengthening military capacity, consolidating democracy and human rights can help develop a successful U.S. alliance in the region.

Moving Away From the Founding Ideals

In 1971, when Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign nation with democratic aspirations, its new constitution promised an inclusive liberal democratic system of governance. However, Bangladesh's past five decades have not been a linear journey toward democracy. The hope for a liberal democratic nation began to fade soon after independence when the newly founded country's leadership deviated from the fundamental tenets of democracy and formed a one-party populist authoritarian government in January 1975. The regime was replaced through a series of violent military coups between August and November, when the country's founding leaders, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, their family members, and associates, were brutally killed – at their homes and inside jail after being incarcerated. The nation moved from civilian authoritarianism to military authoritarianism. In the following 15 years, the country experienced military rule and several failed coups, witnessed the assassination of another president – Ziaur Rahman – in 1981 and the rise of yet another military leader – H. M. Ershad – in early 1982. The entire period deprived Bangladeshi citizens of democracy and the promised inclusive political system of governance.

An eight-year pro-democracy movement that brought all political parties closer and was spearheaded by opposition parties culminated in a popular uprising in December 1990 that deposed the military government. The uprising raised hopes for democratization at last in Bangladesh. That expectation was based on the lessons of pro-democracy movements elsewhere, and particularly an agreement signed by the political parties at the height of the movement promising to adhere to the fundamental canons of liberal democracy such as fair elections, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press, among others.

A fair election and peaceful transfer of power to an elected government in 1991 marked the beginning of Bangladesh's democratization process. The BNP won the 1991 election. However, the opposition – the Awami League – was unwilling to play by the same rules. In subsequent elections, the Awami League and the BNP swapped place governing and being in opposition every five

years. The trust deficit among the major political parties, especially the Awami League and the BNP, engendered acrimony, street agitation, and violence. The incessant wrangling between the two parties rendered the parliament dysfunctional. Instead of consolidating democracy and building democratic institutions, an all-powerful “Prime Ministerial System” was created, in which the prime minister remained beyond scrutiny and accountability. Thus, the concentration of power in one office created the opportunity for the emergence of a constitutionally permitted authoritarian leader.

Although the institutions needed for the consolidation of democracy remained either weak or absent, elections were held somewhat fairly between 1991 and 2008, thanks to the caretaker government system. Except for the February 15, 1996 election, which was marred by rampant vote-rigging, all four national elections in that period ensured a peaceful transfer of power. When the incumbent BNP tried to manipulate the caretaker system in 2006, violent street protests broke out. Heightened violence and international pressure paved the way for the military to step in and install a caretaker technocratic government. Although the intervention initially had public support and the blessing of the international community, domestic discontent, the Asian economic crisis, an inability to deliver on the promised political reforms, an ill-conceived notion of removing two main political leaders (Khaleda Zia of the BNP and Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League) from politics, and pressure from international actors forced the military to hold an election in late 2008 which produced a sizable victory for the Awami League.

With a three-fourths majority in the parliament, the Awami League began to adopt measures in 2010 that were designed to weaken the opposition incrementally, make elections ineffective, muzzle the press, and create a culture of fear. To establish complete control over politics, the Awami League government removed the caretaker government provision from the constitution, which had ensured the previous four fair elections. The government also adopted legal and extrajudicial measures to silence critics. Two legislative acts – an amendment to the 2006 Information and

Technology Act in 2013, notably increasing penalties in Section 57, and the Digital Security Act of 2018 – played a vital role in employing harsh punitive measures for criticizing the government, allowed arrest without a warrant and indefinite detention, and in a practical sense criminalized dissent. Furthermore, between 2009 and 2018, at least 1,921 people became victims of extrajudicial killings, and 109 were victims of enforced disappearances, according to Odhikar, a human rights group.

The incumbent Awami League government also took steps to control the judiciary. Against the spirit of the separation of powers, the government issued rules that retained the power of appointment, administration, and removal of lower court judges in the president's hands instead of the Supreme Court. In another instance, when a chief justice ruled against an amendment that empowered the parliament to impeach Supreme Court judges in 2018, he was forced to leave the country, according to his published memoir. With legal and extralegal repressive measures and control over the judiciary, it became easier for the Awami League government to persecute opposition leaders with frivolous cases and silence criticism.

Thus, it was not surprising when the incumbent government won both the 2014 and 2018 elections by astonishingly large margins, with the BNP and other opposition parties boycotting the 2014 contest entirely. With the help of the administration, the election commission, and law enforcement agencies, the Awami League and its allies secured 288 seats out of 300 in the 2018 election. The 2018 election was described by the New York Times as “farcical” and by the Economist as “transparently fraudulent.” The elections were manipulated to create parliaments with no opposition and the legislative body became subservient to the executive. Beyond shrinking space for dissent and adopting increasing draconian measures, the incumbent government also created a situation in which the boundaries between the state, the government, and the ruling party have become blurred.

With two consecutive rigged elections held in 2014 and 2018, the adoption of legal measures to curb freedom of expression, increasing incidents of extrajudicial killings, and allegations of

infringing on judicial independence, the past few years clearly show how far Bangladesh has moved away from the promises of 1971 and the commitment to the people made at the beginning of the democratic era in 1991. The limited space provided to the opposition, regularly held elections, and democratic rhetoric are the façade of a hybrid regime.

The Return of Religion to Politics

Secularism was included as a state principle in the Bangladeshi Constitution framed in 1972, against the backdrop of the use of Islam as justification for Pakistani rule for 22 years. In theory, this consigned religion to the private realm, and therefore did away with the mix of religion and politics. But 50 years later, religion has returned to the center stage of politics in Bangladesh. The rhetoric of political leaders is infused with religious references, the incumbent has succumbed to pressure from conservative Islamists in recent years, and religion-based political parties tend to exercise significant influence in politics.

Unfortunately, the pathway for religion returning to politics began soon after the constitution was written. The meaning of “secularism” remained vague to both the ruling elites and the common masses; the government quickly began undercutting the spirit of secularism through an array of activities, including broadcasting religious programs on state-controlled media. However, in recent decades, incessant and bitter animosity between the two major political parties, the Awami League and the BNP, prepared fertile ground for the rise of Islamists as political actors. Both top-down and bottom-up processes influence the increasingly dominant role of religion in state and society. Over the years, the government and political parties took initiatives to Islamize political discourse and legitimize Islamist actors. Meanwhile, Islamist organizations and movements played a vital role in Islamizing society.

Before Bangladesh witnessed its democratic transformation in the 1990s, almost two decades of military regimes showed a predilection toward Islam as a political ideology and a marker of national identity. Military rulers gave constitutional legitimacy

through the removal of secularism from the constitution in 1978 and the declaration of Islam as the state religion in 1988. The major political parties provided political legitimacy to Islamists when they allied with the pro-democracy movement.

During the democratic period starting in 1991, the ruling parties and opposition made pacts and alliances with Islamist parties to attain their political goals. Before the 1996 election, the Awami League came to an unwritten understanding with the Jamaat-e-Islam (JeI), the largest Islamist party in the country, which had actually opposed independence. In 1999, the BNP formed an alliance with the JeI and won the 2001 election. Before the election scheduled in January 2007, again, these parties brought Islamists into their platforms to achieve the immediate goal of securing victory. The Awami League signed a memorandum of understanding with the Bangladesh Khilafat Majlish (BKM), a radical Islamist party. The BNP-led four-party alliance also included Islamist parties – Islamic Oikkyo Jot (IOJ) and the JeI – who insisted that the only way to save Islam was to vote for the alliance. This tendency of cajoling Islamists was also on display ahead of the 2018 national election, which the Awami League won in a landslide. Among the total 66 Islamist political parties in Bangladesh, the Awami League-led alliance included an astounding 61; the BNP-led alliance had five within its fold.

Interestingly, the Islamists received more political legitimacy and a greater social foothold after a massive protest in 2013 against the Islamists. A youth-led monthlong sit-in, referred to as the Shahbag movement, demanded capital punishment for those convicted of crimes against humanity in the 1971 war. A special tribunal established by the Awami League in 2010 to try those who committed war crimes began delivering verdicts in February 2013. Many of those who were charged were high-ranking leaders of the JeI. The JeI and the BNP alleged that the trials were politically motivated, while the Awami League insisted that the process was intended to bring an end to impunity.

The Awami League government moved quickly to co-opt the 2013 Shahbag protest and guided it to its benefit. In a countermovement, Islamists condemned the Shahbag protest and its organizers as

anti-Islamic and branded them as atheists. Smaller Islamist organizations and Qawmi madrassa-based groups gathered under the banner of the Hefazate Islam (HI), or Safeguard of Islam. The HI organized a long march to the capital in April 2013 and issued a 13-point list of demands, including the introduction of an anti-blasphemy law carrying the death penalty for anyone who “insults” Islam and the Prophet.

Although the Awami League government initially took a hard stance against the HI, it later shifted its position. The incumbent regime’s authoritarian turn, especially since the non-inclusive election of 2014, prompted the party to rely on Islamic rhetoric and befriending conservative Islamists for legitimacy. By early 2014, the government sent clear signals that it would rather move away from the secularists to prove its credential as the guardian of Islam. The government began to appease the Islamists by revising school textbooks in 2017 and removing the works of non-Muslim authors, as suggested by the HI. In addition, Lady Justice’s statue was removed from the Supreme Court premises, as it was deemed un-Islamic by the Islamists. In continuing attempts to appease the Islamists, in 2018, the government decided to construct 560 mosques around the country.

Concurrent with the rise of conservative and radical Islamists within mainstream politics was the proliferation of violent extremist Islamist groups within the country and the presence of transnational terrorist groups such as al-Qaida in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State. Despite recent success in taming these terrorist groups through kinetic measures, the likelihood of their resurgence is strong because of the changes in social ethos, the absence of democracy, and religion’s heightened role in politics.

Socioeconomic Transformation

The Bangladeshi economy has witnessed significant growth in recent decades as its economic structure also underwent changes. Before independence in 1971, the economy was mainly dependent on agriculture. Now, services and industry are the primary engines

of Bangladesh's economy, thanks to remittances sent by migrant workers and the growth of the readymade garment sector.

Bangladesh has emerged as the second-largest apparel exporter in the world. The garment sector is also the biggest provider of employment; 4 million work in factories, 3.2 million of whom are women. The garment sector's revenue increased from a meager \$40,000 in 1979 to a staggering \$34.13 billion in 2019. However, this success has not come without costs: the suffering of workers, low wages, and a lack of compliance with basic safety standards in many garment factories. After a number of deadly accidents, including the collapse of a factory building called Rana Plaza in 2013, which took more than 1,200 lives and injured at least 2,500, two major safety initiatives by the world's leading brands and retailers were tasked to inspect and oversee work at in the country's factories. Besides the garment sector, remittances from migrant workers, mostly in the Middle East, are a major source of revenue, which has been increased from \$23.71 million in 1976 to \$16.37 billion in 2019. Bangladesh is now the ninth largest recipient of remittances in the world.

According to official statistics, since the democratic transition in 1991, Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has continued to rise between 5 and 6 percent per year. Growth was 7.8 percent in the 2017-18 fiscal year and 7.3 percent in 2019-20. Bangladesh is the fifth fastest-growing economy in the world. However, some research organizations are skeptical about the official statistics, pointing to incoherence between various indicators and GDP growth claims. In the last few decades, Bangladesh also witnessed a striking decline in poverty, improvements in the infant and child mortality rate, sanitation, and women's education.

Bangladesh's social and economic successes have led many economists and practitioners to call it a "Bangladesh Paradox" – that is, achieving these successes notwithstanding poor governance, high population density, a limited natural resource base, underdeveloped infrastructure, frequent natural disasters, and political instability. Bangladesh's economic success is commendable, but the progress has also caused rising inequality and disparity. A New York-based research firm, Wealth-X,

published a report in 2019 on the 10 fastest-growing high net worth countries. Bangladesh stood third on the list. Bangladesh is now a home of new millionaires, while income equality is rising at an alarming rate. One in six persons in Bangladesh are undernourished, according to a U.N. report. While in the past decade, the “Bangladesh paradox” was meant to point to Bangladesh’s economic and social successes despite poor governance, it is increasingly indicating that a large segment of the population is being left behind despite financial gains for a few.

Like other countries, Bangladesh has experienced changes in its social fabric, values, and culture due to unprecedented globalization and technological innovations. With the rise of consumerism and individualism, previously prevalent and strong social bonds are declining, and society’s lack of compassion is rising. Digital media, particularly the internet, played an important role in bringing global popular culture, cuisine, and lifestyles to Bangladesh. With the availability of cheap mobile phones and internet connections, a large segment of the population has access to information. As of December 2020, the total number of internet subscribers in Bangladesh was 111.9 million. The total number of mobile phone connections was 163 million, and social media users totaled 36 million in January 2020. However, inequality is still prevalent; in 2019, only 13 percent of the population had access to the internet. Moreover, the integration of global and local culture and values has not always been harmonious. There is also evidence that Islamists have been effectively using new media to reach audiences and propagate their ideology.

The Last Words

The past five decades of Bangladesh’s independence have been a journey of transformation. Despite a lack of natural resources, poor infrastructure, an adverse environment, and high population density, the people of Bangladesh have demonstrated resilience and achieved many successes. A country that was unknown to the world has earned international recognition as the largest contributor to the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. A development model based on microcredit invented by the Grameen Bank has changed the lives of millions at home and

abroad, and Bangladesh has been the home of world's largest nongovernmental development organization, called BRAC.

This extraordinary progress has been tainted by a lack of democracy, severe violations of human rights and progressive attenuation of tolerance. Instead of going forward by consolidating democracy and strengthening state institutions, in recent years the country has moved backward, undermining the basic tenets of democracy. As the country reaches its golden jubilee, it stands at a crossroads: Will its achievements become sustainable and inclusive, or will it go down the path of becoming an authoritarian state? Its geopolitical importance provides it opportunities, but the future of Bangladesh lies in how it uses these opportunities to thrive to its potential.

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