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# BANGLADESH IN 2000

## *Searching for Better Governance?*

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M. Rashiduzzaman

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In the year 2000, Bangladesh was mired in lawlessness, intractable governance, executive-judiciary acrimony, enfeebled diplomacy, and economic stagnation. However, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina remained firmly saddled in power. She showed little sign of yielding to the opposition pressure to hold a fresh election under the caretaker government, ignored the fusillades of allegations against her government, and endured as a feisty leader of the ruling Awami League (AL), confident of winning the next election. The standoff between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the AL changed little and their rhetoric continued to divide the nation. The meandering hope of the year was the modified opposition strategy to lower the old-style prolonged *hartals* (general strikes), and roiling and indefinite work stoppages. However, the BNP and its partners in the opposition alliance did not lift their boycott of the Sangshad, the national parliament, except for stints to retain their lawmakers' status. The BNP-led alliance also kept the *hartal* option for the future, a political weapon without which the opposition is not taken seriously in Bangladesh.

### Spiraling Lawlessness

The grim lawlessness in the country was the biggest fear of the people throughout the year. It was reported that as many as 15,000 murders took place during the past four years of the AL administration, since 1996.<sup>1</sup> According to several reports, there were presumably fewer murders during the first nine months of 2000. As many as 2,560 persons had been violently

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M. Rashiduzzaman is Associate Professor in Political Science at Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey.

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1. *Manabjiban* (Dhaka, Bengali), May 7, 2000.

killed during the first nine months in 2000 compared to the same period in 1999, when 2,814 persons died in such a fashion.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, the statistics of relatively fewer murders in 2000 did not spell relief to a public exasperated by the multitude of violent crimes and gruesome political killings. *Protham Alo*, a popular Bengali newspaper, reported that the daily average of violent crimes reached 300.<sup>3</sup> Not much later, the *New Nation* reported that on average six people were killed every week in Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup> However, a total of 3,267 people were murdered, with 617 women molested and 161 falling victim to acid throwing, according to the Bureau of Human Rights Bangladesh (BHRB). But actually, the total number of abnormal deaths was much higher. According to the same report, a total of 6,234 people were variously killed and 40,116 wounded in different incidents of hijacking, theft, robbery, terrorist activities, acid throwing, rape, abduction, campus violence, political killings, suicide, death in police custody, and natural disasters from January 1 to December 25.<sup>5</sup> The number of human lives lost in violent crimes since 1996 was close to the number of casualties in neighboring countries languishing in prolonged, low-intensity conflicts.

Those who coerce people for illegal gratification or extort the small shopkeepers and businesspeople have been on the rise, and are called the *mastans* or the *chandabaz*—collectors of forced donations. More accurately, however, they may be described for the most part as the otherwise underutilized foot soldiers of the major parties.<sup>6</sup> Such killers, extortionists, looters, and perpetrators of violent crimes are also called the *santrashis* (terrorists). They usually operate under the umbrella of so-called godfathers, who periodically engage in turf battles with one another that can easily envelope bystanders.

However, the small shopkeepers in Dhaka and other urban (and even rural) areas who have been the frequent targets of the *mastans*' and *santrashis*' crimes are also joining the ranks of people with influence. In many areas, they have set up their own organizations to protect themselves against the extortionists and often demonstrate in the streets to vent feelings against the lawlessness that they suffer. According to an unverified estimate, 600 shopkeepers' associations existed in the Dhaka Metropolitan areas alone.<sup>7</sup>

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2. Amir Huq, "Terrorism with a Mission," *New Nation* (Dhaka, English-language daily), November 3, 2000.

3. *Protham Alo* (Dhaka, Bengali), October 18, 2000.

4. *New Nation*, November 18, 2000.

5. *Ibid.*, December 26, 2000.

6. Rehman Sobhan, "The Mastan in Politics," *ibid.*, June 28, 2000.

7. This is unverified information collected by Bashir Ahmed, lecturer in Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Bangladesh, who assisted the author in Dhaka in July and August 2000.

As irony would have it, the extraordinary powers that the AL government assumed earlier in 2000 were of little use to safeguard life and property. The opposition complained that special powers were actually directed against the political antagonists while the police did not apprehend the criminal offenders. Worse still, the law and order issue became a political football—the opposition blamed the problem on the ruling party’s armed cadres who presumably indulged in criminal activities with impunity. The AL on the other hand charged that the opposition-nurtured “terrorists” were out to destabilize its government. Meanwhile, the “us” versus “them” division among the people paralyzed the law enforcement agencies.

Antiwomen crimes skyrocketed without any relief in sight; even police officers, fellow students, teachers, employers, and managers have been accused of sexual harassment and violence against women. Acid throwing on young Bangladeshi females attracted international attention. During the first six months of 2000 alone, 82 women fell victims to such attacks.<sup>8</sup> By the middle of the year, 348 women had been raped.<sup>9</sup>

### Failed Governance?

Contrary to her triumphal claims, Prime Minister Hasina has been accused of failed governance. In a blunt November 24 editorial, the *Daily Star* called for a new administrative foundation and warned that incremental reforms of governance, as it is evident from the past, would not work. The Public Administration Reform Commission’s (PARC) widely publicized report in 2000 asserted that endemic corruption was encouraged by its huge size, but over centralization also created the scope for it.

A spate of signed newspaper articles and special reports during the summer and fall of 2000 accused the AL government of gross mismanagement of public affairs beyond what is best suited to achieve partisan goals. Some observers and discussion groups insisted that the four-year-long rule of the AL suffered from “organizational weakness.”<sup>10</sup> Human rights groups accused the government of arresting, harassing, and contriving cases against its political opponents. Amnesty International reported that police torture was endemic in Bangladesh.

Well-publicized scandals of corruption, unauthorized occupation of state-owned land, and forcible capture of private properties and impossible-to-ignore politicization of the bureaucracy stirred up public anxiety. According to a report in the *New Nation*, the Berlin-based Transparency International put

8. *Independent* (Dhaka, English), July 1, 2000.

9. *Daily Star* (Dhaka, English), July 2, 2000.

10. Muzammel H. Khan, “How Did AL Perform in the Last Four Years?” *ibid.*, June 24, 2000.

Bangladesh in fourth place on its global corruption scale. World Bank reports also placed Bangladesh as one of the nations most steeped in corruption.<sup>11</sup> Despite the spiraling corruption and crime, pro-Hasina newspapers and the pro-AL columnists gave a more positive spin to AL rule. Members of the government party spoke of its accomplishments throughout the country on the floor of the opposition-boycotted national parliament. By the end of the year, the AL high command was concerned that its poor management of law and order might hurt them in the next election. Yet, the BNP-led alliance perceptibly failed to fully exploit the ruling party's evident failures to its own advantage and the ferocity of the opposition's attack did not hold up.

### Undeclared Election Campaign

Concerns about law and order extended into projections about the 2001 elections. A sitting minister and a prominent opposition leader made public statements doubting the prospects of a free and fair election until the situation improved. People realized that a precarious deadlock was unfolding over the composition of the non-partisan caretaker government that constitutionally was required to supervise the election and run an interim administration for three months. This also raised concerns over that government's ability to create a congenial climate that was hoped would be in place as the first step toward the next election. Some feared that the election would see violence between the backers of the ruling party and the opposition alliance. Yet, the parties kicked their campaigns into gear—the AL invited applications for party nominations in mid-November and the BNP earlier had established a new office to handle election matters. The Election Commission was in doldrums for a while because of its own internal bickering. The energized politicians were out mobilizing support in the districts, but opposition leaders objected to the Election Commission's composition and were unhappy over what they alleged were inflated voter lists.

The BNP, the Jaty Party (JP), Jamaat, and Islamic Oikya had entered into a joint front against the ruling AL in 1999. By October 2000, they further solidified understanding on the number of seats that each alliance partner would jointly contest. The opposition alliance suffered an enormous setback when General H. M. Ershad, leader of the JP, was jailed in November when the Supreme Court upheld an earlier conviction on corruption charges. Nevertheless, Khaleda Zia reconfirmed that the four parties in the united front would fight the next election jointly. The four planned widespread anti-government protests for after the Ramadan and Eid holiday in December. Hasina lost no time in dismissing the opposition alliance as a dangerous grouping of "anti-liberation forces," alleging that they wanted to subvert peace and turn

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11. *New Nation*, November 24, 2000.

Bangladesh back into the old Pakistani province of East Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> To counter the opposition's moves, Hasina hinted that the AL would foster cooperation with left-leaning groups. The opposition in reply accused the AL government of politicizing bureaucratic recruitment and posting local-level officials, who might be useful to the AL in the anticipated election, charges that the government denied.

Neither of the two main parties obtained a clear and absolute victory in the past two elections because each received about one-third of the total votes. Both the BNP and the AL received enough coalition support from the smaller parties to allow them to form governments in 1991 and 1996, respectively. By most reckonings, the outcome of any future election is not likely to differ much. Opposition leaders warned that the long grind of lawlessness has embittered people beyond tolerance. BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia confidently predicted that the opposition alliance would win 63% of the popular votes in the next election, but Hasina belittled the opposition leader's high hopes.<sup>13</sup>

### Hasina Versus the Judiciary

Hasina had several confrontations with the judiciary in 2000. A new one developed at year's end in which she and her home minister attacked the High Court for granting bail to the editor and publisher of the *Inquilab*, a right-wing daily newspaper known for its strong anti-AL line. The roots of the AL government's conflict with the judiciary lie in the aftermath of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975. Impatient with the slow progress of the mandatory review of the case, Hasina alleged conspiracy and made anti-judiciary remarks for which the High Court admonished her. In turn, the Supreme Court Bar Association filed a contempt case against Hasina because of her demeaning utterances against the High Court. When the High Court came with a split verdict on the Mujib murder case on December 15, 2000, AL activists expressed their anger by rampaging through the streets. The resulting violence saw one person die, several others injured, and the damage and destruction of automobiles and other private property.

Meanwhile, the High Court eventually issued a warning to Hasina that she be more careful when questioning the judicial process. A public relations blow to Hasina, the mandate also left the legal profession divided between pro-Hasina lawyers and an opposition concentrated in the Supreme Court Bar Association. Faced with a series of politically motivated cases against its leaders, the BNP feared Hasina was adamant about destroying the opposition

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12. *Daily Star*, October 28, 2000, in *Fair Election Monitoring*, November 5, 2000, on the World Wide Web at <<http://www.femaonline.org/newsletter/2000.htm>>.

13. *Ibid.*, November 14, 2000; and *Independent*, Dhaka, November 17, 2000.

through weakening the avenues for judicial redress. The AL's election promise to separate the executive from the judiciary was not fulfilled during the four years of Hasina's prime ministership. The judiciary itself was swept up in controversy when a High Court judge suddenly resigned in November over a scandal.

### Surging Factionalism

More than 100 people were killed in the AL's factional strife in 1999.<sup>14</sup> That trend continued in 2000. The ruling party's factional and personal rivalries reached the depth of intra-party killing at district and sub-district levels. For the AL, the most well-known dissident was Kader Siddiqi. He deserted the AL and contested the by-election with his own party, which he lost. Some of the local rivalries, especially among the pro-AL student fronts, resulted in violent confrontations. However, the ruling party's most complex and endless internal dispute was in Sylhet, where four top AL leaders continued wrangling with each other over local prominence. Out of the 19 Sangshad members from Sylhet, 14 claimed loyalty to different factions.<sup>15</sup>

The underlying dispute between those BNP lawmakers who wanted to boycott the Sangshad and those who did not become more obvious when a defiant party member of parliament attended the parliament's sessions. He was expelled from the BNP, but the party's factional rupture reverberated in the districts that Khaleda tried to patch with half-hearted success. Later, BNP moderates and hard-liners started feuding at a time when Begum Khaleda Zia was in poor health. Meanwhile, there were fears that the JP, which already was divided into two groups, would have to cope with more factional and personal rivalries with the November jailing of party leader, Ershad. Finally, early in November the controversial leader of Jamaat, Ghulam Azam, stepped down with some implying that he was too contentious to lead the Islamic party.

### Fresh Controversy over the CHT Peace Accord

Sheikh Hasina had claimed that her peace accord to end the separatist insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) was among her most notable achievements since she came to power in 1996. But by the fall of 2000 the unraveling peace agreement became her nemesis. Prominent tribal leader Shantu Larma accused the AL government of failing to meet the peace treaty's obligations. There was a growing perception that other Bangladeshis

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14. M. Rashiduzzaman, "Awami League's Infighting and Sheikh Hasina's Embattled Leadership," *ibid.*, October, 26, 1999.

15. *Protham Alo*, November 7, 2000, p. 1.

of tribal ancestries might also make demands for their own autonomy. The dispute had started when the government acquired some land for official purposes. Shantu Larma objected that land acquisition in the CHT was not allowed without prior permission of the new tribal-dominated council. But the government of Bangladesh claimed that it had fulfilled nearly all of the agreed-upon terms and the remainder was being put into practice.

## Bangladesh in the International Arena

Estimates of huge gas reserves and possibly oil suddenly put Bangladesh on the energy map of the world. As such, the nation is under diplomatic pressure to sell its natural resources. India wants to buy the surplus natural gas, and some U.S. oil and gas companies already investing in Bangladesh want the business of lifting and piping gas to India. The question of gas sales to India became politicized since the opposition objected to any deal with New Delhi until other bilateral matters were settled first. The AL government liked the Indian proposal in principle but as yet appears undecided on any given course of action.

Bangladesh's term as a nonpermanent member of the U.N. Security Council continued. The AL government signed the comprehensive test ban treaty (CTBT). In light of the nuclear turmoil on the subcontinent, many Western nations and the U.S. government welcomed the action. President Clinton's 13-hour stop in Dhaka in March was the first-ever visit by a U.S. president, but the jaunt was a bare extension of his visit to India. In a disappointment for many in Bangladesh, Clinton canceled for security reasons most of his important official visits outside Dhaka. But as a follow up to Clinton's visit, Prime Minister Hasina was invited to visit Washington in October.

The asymmetry between India and its small neighbors left Bangladesh with few diplomatic and strategic choices. Nevertheless, Bangladesh's position between the state of West Bengal and India's insurgency-prone northeast makes it important to the larger nation. So far New Delhi's military solutions have failed to quell the separatists in this turbulent region. India badly needs logistical facility through Bangladeshi territories to deal with the guerrilla warfare in the troubled states of the northeast. New Delhi also wants to form a subregional trade group with Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The Indian leaders want to use Chittagong and Khulna ports for its northeastern region, and India has a surplus of consumer products for which Bangladesh is a good market.

Periodic accusations of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and Pakistani intelligence activities in Bangladesh came not only from the Indian central government, but also from local authorities in neighboring Indian regions. During the year, these regional authorities grew increasingly vociferous in their charges. Illegal smuggling, intermittent border clashes, and the acrimonious

debate over what the press termed to be an uneven water treaty made frequent newspaper headlines. During the summer of 2000, India's unilateral decision to expel as many as 1,000 Bangladeshis deemed to be illegally in the country back across the border sparked fresh border tension. It was further reported that the Bangladeshi government raised only soft objections to New Delhi's "push in" activities.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, in Hasina's address at the U.N. Millennium session in September, the prime minister suggested that actions should be taken against such military regimes that overthrow their elected governments. General Musharraf of Pakistan took the address as an indirect attack on his military takeover in 1999 and reacted angrily by canceling a previously scheduled meeting with Hasina. Domestically, while the AL and its cohorts supported her statements, Hasina's critics labeled her to be "undiplomatic." They were concerned that making such assertions would hurt the long-term bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh.<sup>17</sup> To make matters worse, another dispute started with Islamabad when a Pakistani diplomat made what were deemed to be derogatory remarks about events in 1971 while he was addressing a seminar in Dhaka. Pakistan eventually recalled the diplomat in question—who Bangladesh had declared *persona non grata*—but the incident reopened old wounds between Dhaka and Islamabad.

## Economy

According to a report from the Bangladesh Bank, higher agricultural output and an increase in industrial activity boosted growth in the gross domestic product (GDP) up to 5.5% from 4.9% in 1999.<sup>18</sup> The report was met with accusations that it purveyed old data for political reasons. The average inflation rate was reported at 5.1% in March 2000, compared to 8.82% of the previous March. Moreover, per capita GDP increased to \$373 per year. But there was negative economic news, too. The size of the public debt increased 31.3%, producing a jump in the money supply from 12.8% in 1999 to 18.6% in 2000. Much of the government's borrowing was from commercial banks, much to the displeasure of international funding agencies.

International economic indicators were equally worrisome. For instance, from January to June, foreign investment in the industrial sector only reached

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16. *New Nation*, June 29, 2000.

17. Farhad Mazhar, "Pakistan Sanage Samparke Tanpuren Kutanaitik Bichakhanat Nai" [Strained relations with Pakistan are not a sign of diplomatic wisdom], *Protham Alo*, editorial, September 21, 2000.

18. *Daily Star*, November 17, 2000. Other information in this section has been extracted from the 1999–2000 (Bangladesh) Bureau of Statistics, newspaper reports, and informal discussions with Bangladeshi economists.

\$630 million.<sup>19</sup> As the year's end drew near, the country's foreign exchange reserves dwindled to about \$1.3 billion. To prevent a serious balance of payments crisis, the government of Bangladesh was negotiating with the International Monetary Fund for help.<sup>20</sup>

Still, not all economic trends were negative. Until the floods that came early and late in the monsoon season engulfed several districts, agricultural performance was steady. Nearly 20% of Bangladesh's GDP for the year was represented by agriculture, livestock, and forestry. The largest share of the country's GDP in fact came from crop agriculture. Newspapers reported that some of Bangladesh's northern districts had a bumper rice crop.

## Conclusion

Few expected that Bangladesh would be able to jettison all of its political woes in the first year of the new millennium. But the nation is at a critical juncture—what comes next could be an era of hope or despair depending on who its leaders are, what their visions are, and what they plan to do. A band of positively motivated leaders, united by national goals, could establish a successful democracy in Bangladesh. It might become a middle-income country through the productive use of its resources, including the export of natural gas in the not-so-distant future. Bangladeshis are waiting and wondering about the next election, but as the year ended they were not overly optimistic about its outcome. Worst of all, the nation is split down the middle along political lines. As the 2001 elections loom, Bangladesh is in dire need of unifiers, not dividers—the country yearns for better governance and pragmatic leadership, not just another election that would perpetuate the status quo.

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19. *Daily Star*, November 17, 2000.

20. *News from Bangladesh*, November 27, 2000, on the World Wide Web at <<http://www.bangladesh-web.com/news/nov/27/v4n410.htm>>.