

The Bangladesh elections and Border Guards Rebellion

Shri EN Rammohan, IPS (Retd)*

Introduction

The results of the Bangladesh elections were generally expected. This was because of the exemplary functioning of the caretaker government. It was clearly under the control of the Bangladesh Army. When the Army took over control, the general apprehension of Bangladesh watchers, especially those who had studied the sequence of military coups in Bangladesh starting with the coup that killed Mujibur Rehman was that, the Army would again be indirectly in control in Bangladesh. This did not happen. The way the Army conducted itself in two spheres clearly removed all doubts on this point. These two spheres were the assiduous work done by the Election Commission in preparing the voters list and the superlative work done in preparing the voter identity cards. With the massive population base of Bangladesh this was an incredible job by any standards. Incidentally India has not yet been able to achieve this. The landslide victory of the Awami League (AL) and the decimation of the Jamaat-e-Islami from seventeen to just two seats justified the neutral stand taken by the Army.

It is now clear that the Bangladesh Rifles rebellion was taken over by the same elements that were controlling the Army during the previous regime. It was a direct reaction to the victory of the AL and the possible establishment of a moderate regime in Bangladesh. To understand this, one has to briefly study the sequence of events after the killing of Mujib ur Rehman and the series of coups that followed.

The Bangladesh insurrection

The election of December 1970 in Pakistan produced a majority for the AL of East Pakistan. At that time, besides the two pro Russian and pro Peking Marxist parties there existed a third Marxist stream called the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) or Jashod. The group was born in 1962, when a group of young men formed a nucleus in Dacca University. They felt that socialism was the only answer to East Bengal's vast poverty. The JSD joined the AL as its most radical and militant wing. At the appropriate time they would come out of the AL. When the election results were out in December 1970 the Pakistan Government, after dallying till March, finally announced an indefinite postponement for summoning the National Assembly. On 02 Mar 1971, there was a mammoth rally which was attended by Mujib ur Rehman. ASM Abdur Rab, later a General Secretary of the JSD, ceremonially burnt the Pakistan flag and hoisted a flag of a 'red sun on a green background' – flag of the future Bangladesh. On the 07 Mar 1971, the Students League presented Mujib with an ultimatum to declare independence or they would take an independent course. The Pakistan Army began a crackdown on 21 Mar 1971.

At that time, there were nearly six thousand troops of the East Bengal Regiment in East Pakistan. Three thousand of these and five thousand para military troops and policemen were massacred by the Pakistan army. Major Zia ur Rehman, then in the East Bengal Regiment, held Chittagong for several days and even declared Independence on Chittagong radio. As the Pakistan Army advanced, he retreated into Tripura with three thousand troops of the East Bengal Regiment. At that time there were a large number of military and civilian Bengalis in Pakistan. Two patriotic Bengali officers of the Pakistan Army, Major Taher and Major Ziauddin, managed to cross over to India near Sialkot and were taken by India's Border Security Force to Assam and Tripura and deployed with the Mukti Bahini in Tangail and Mymensingh sectors. The fight for independence lasted from Mar to Dec 1971, when the Indian Army advanced into East Pakistan, and liberated Bangladesh in a lightening campaign in Dec 1971. More than 90,000 troops of the Pakistan Army surrendered and were disarmed. Mujibur Rehman returned triumphantly to an emotional welcome in Dacca.

The Mujib Era, 1971-1975

Mujib began well, with tremendous support from his people. Unfortunately, this was short lived. Mujib made several mistakes. Among the major ones was the patronage of Indian businessmen by his brother. He was the smuggling kingpin of Bangladesh. Another mistake was the creation of the Rakhi Bahini. Mujib distrusted the Army, because he had been imprisoned in a military prison in Pakistan. The Rakhi Bahini was not fully under the control of the government as the senior officials of the force went directly to Mujib who protected them.

All this was to be seen in the background of the ground situation in Bangladesh. The eastern sub continent was one of the poorest areas of the world. Each day, there were battles between those who owned land and those who worked on it. For the peasantry life was a knife's edge. A knife edge on which questions of food, land and water were constantly answered by cycles of revolt and suppression.¹ Though Mujib knew this well, the unholy nexus between Indian mahajans and the political leadership of the AL led to large scale smuggling of commodities from Bangladesh to India. Regrettably, it was Mujibur Rehman's brother who headed the smuggling network in Bangladesh. The food situation deteriorated, and within four years of Independence there was famine in the land and nearly a hundred thousand peasants died of hunger. The government resorted to deploying the Army to maintain law and order. This was a very wrong step. The rot in the administration became visible to the Army and the young officers began to question the unlawful authority being exercised by persons close to Mujibur Rehman. In the last days of Mujib's regime, following a period of severe famine in 1974, enormous popular resentment had developed towards India and Mujib's political identification with that country. Every village faced with starvation, listened to stories of massive smuggling and profit making, from the alleged shipment of rice and jute to India.

The black market operating across the border was a fact. India was no longer viewed as an ally who had fought the Pakistanis to give Independence to Bangladesh. It was instead viewed as a new sub imperialist power that was now bleeding Bangladesh white.

A serious mistake made by Mujib was in not giving pride of place to officers and men in the new Bangladesh Army, who had fought as Mukti Bahini after being trained by the Indian Army and paramilitary forces. Military and civilian personnel of East Bengali origin who were in Pakistan when the rebellion broke out were repatriated in 1973 to Bangladesh after India released the 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war after the Simla agreement. A number of Mukti Bahini were recruited as officers and other ranks in the Bangladesh Army in 1972. They were all trained by the Indian Army. The military officers and other ranks of East Bengal origin left in Pakistan in 1971, when repatriated in 1973 were given their seniority. This caused a division in the Armed Forces.

Insurrections

In 1975, two military putsches followed by an Army mutiny took place. The last was a soldiers uprising the like of which had not been seen in the subcontinent. On 15 Aug 1975 the government of Mujibur Rehman was brought down by an early morning military putsch led by six Majors and the troops under their control. They were from the only armoured regiment of Bangladesh and from an artillery regiment. The political organisers of this coup were from a circle within Mujibur Rehman's AL, which had for years been considered a pro-Pakistan and USA faction. The principal and identifiable figures among this group were: Mahbub Alam Chashi, former Pakistan Foreign Service officer, Taheruddin Thakur, Mujib's Information Minister and Khondakar Mushtaq Ahmed the Commerce Minister. The full extent of foreign involvement was not established but serious allegations have been made claiming prior knowledge and involvement by the US CIA and Pakistan, together with elements from the administrative, police and intelligence apparatus of Bangladesh who had remained unreconciled sympathisers of the old unity of Pakistan.

Between Aug and Nov 1975 an uneasy period of stalemate and tension set in. Former Commerce Minister Khondakar Mushtaq Ahmed took over as acting President. A man sympathetic to the United States, he was the Foreign Minister of the Provincial government in 1971. Together with his Foreign Secretary Mahbub Alam Chashi, Mushtaq had allegedly been the contact point for secret negotiations with the United States' State Department in late 1971 for a settlement of the East Pakistan crisis. A number of senior officers of the Bangladesh Army including Major General Zia ur Rehman, the Deputy Chief of Army Staff had apparently been approached to join the coup, but had held back from active involvement.

Barely three months after this coup, on 03 Nov 1975, a second coup was organised, led by Brigadier Khalid Musharraf with the help of the Dacca brigade. Major General Zia ur Rehman was placed under house arrest. There was a stand off between the six Majors who had carried out the first coup and Brigadier Khalid Musharraf. It was decided finally that they would be given safe passage and could be flown to Bangkok. Moments before their departure men under the command of the majors entered the Dacca prison and killed four senior Ministers of Mujib's cabinet. All of them would have been part of a pro Mujib restoration. It had been rumoured that Brigadier Khalid Musharraf's coup was engineered by India. This was not so at all.

When General Zia ur Rehman was put under house arrest, he telephoned his good friend Colonel Abu Taher, who along with Major Ziauddin had defected from Pakistan and led the Mukti Bahini along with Zia ur Rehman in adjacent sectors. Unknown to General Zia both Colonel Taher and Colonel Ziauddin were leaders of the Biplobi Shamik Shanga - Revolutionary Soldiers Organisation, a part of the JSD. Jointly operating with the Biplobi Gana Bahini - Revolutionary People's Army made up of guerilla fighters from the Independence struggle, the sepoys of Dacca cantonment took the lead in an immediate general revolt against Khalid Musharraf's putsch. The JSD was already planning this revolt when Mujib was assassinated. The revolt quickly gathered momentum and spread to cantonments outside Dacca even as Brigadier Khalid Musharraf and his group of officers were killed outside Dacca Cantonment. Meanwhile General Zia had been rescued and was given a list of twelve demands that the revolting soldiers had prepared. The main demand was that the Armed Forces would act as the defenders of the country's oppressed classes. The entire structure of the Armed Forces was to be changed. A committee similar to the Soldier Soviets of the Russian Army was to be established. The Calcutta weekly Frontier-Bangladesh State and Revolution wrote on 13 Dec 1975 - "The BD Army rose in a generalised insurrection with rank and file defying their officers calling for the implementation of the twelve demands. This constituted a radical departure never before seen in any South Asian Army."

When General Zia saw the twelve demands, he was taken aback and realised that he was on the verge of a precipice. He signed the paper of the twelve demands but managed to slip out of the request to speak on Dacca Radio to the Nation. Between the 8 to 10 Dec 1975, General Zia then turned the situation around. Taking the help of the Police, he directed the arrest of the leaders of the JSD including Colonel Taher, who was kept in Dacca jail and later tried and executed there. General Zia turned to the several thousand civil and military officials of Bengali origin who were repatriated from Pakistan to stabilise the country. Control of the administration passed into the hands of these officials. A number of JSD leaders were tried and executed. The group then went underground. General Zia re-established contact with the Pakistan Government. He raised the Directorate General Forces Intelligence (DGFI) on the line of the Inter Services Intelligence of Pakistan. After Bangladesh was liberated the leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI) and other fundamentalist groups who had sided with the Pakistan Army had fled the country. General Zia allowed them to return to Bangladesh though cases of murder were registered against them. Very soon Bangladesh was declared an Islamic Republic. Insurgent groups of the Northeast like the Mizo National Front who were given shelter, arms and training by Pakistan and who had left Bangladesh in 1971 were welcomed back.

Bangladesh from 1976 to 2006

From 1976 to 1996, Bangladesh continued in the same mode. In 1996, Sheikh Hasina and the AL were elected to power. Though she tried to take back Bangladesh to the Mujib period she was not successful. In 2001, the Bangladesh National Party started by General Zia came back to power under his widow Begum Zia. Then came the elections of 2006 under a caretaker Government and the Army taking control of running this Government after some hiccups.

Bangladesh Elections and Revolt of Bangladesh Rifles

Bangladesh went to the elections in 2008 under the watchful eyes of the United Nations representatives. When the BNP government tried to manipulate the election Commission and the Caretaker Government the United Nations stepped in and threatened the Bangladesh Government of withdrawing the considerable contingent of United Nations Peacekeeping Forces for Bangladesh. Two factors ensured good elections – a very neutral revision of electoral rolls and preparation of voter identity cards. General Moin, the Army Chief and his staff officers played a very important role during this period remaining strictly neutral. This was substantiated when the election results came out. The Jamaat-e-Islami got only 2 seats against 17 that they had. The fact that large number of women, particularly women from the minorities, voted freely was very significant and showed the excellent Police arrangements made.

The revolt of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) was the first expression of the pro Pakistan group that they were not taking the election results lying down. The BDR is a paramilitary organisation. Its officers are deputed from the Army. The BDR cadre is not entitled to perks that officers of the Army get. These perks are considerable, on the lines of Pakistan Army. That there was disgruntlement brewing in the BDR was known for some time. It was not correct for the DGFI to say that they were taken aback, when it happened. It has been established that unknown persons with weapons, neither of the BDR nor of the Army, had entered the BDR Hq Pilkhana and used these weapons against the BDR officers. Two binoculars recovered from the Pilkhana campus were of a make used neither by the Army nor the BDR. So is the case with some ammunition boots recovered from the Pilkhana campus.³ It is not difficult to conclude that several officers in the DGFI who have links with fundamentalist groups like the JEI do not want the old cases of 1975 to be raked up; and they wanted to utilise the agitation in the BDR to assassinate Sheikh Hasina. When the killings of the Director General BDR and other officers became known, she sensibly refused amnesty for anyone who had killed these officers. General Moin, the Army Chief stood beside her like a rock. Her courage and good sense saved the situation for Bangladesh.

Hasina's huge electoral victory gave her confidence to purge 'reformist elements' in her own party. A relatively young cabinet, sans these tested leaders and with many women, gave her ministry a new look. Hasina decided to press ahead with her electoral promises and the trial of the 1971 war criminals. A unanimous resolution in Parliament for the proposed trial, of mostly top JEI leaders and some from the BNP as well, was followed by Hasina's vocal support for a South Asian anti terror Task Force that upset Pakistan and its allies in Bangladesh. Her government arrested Chittagong's leading arms dealer Hafizur Rehman and restarted the Chittagong arms seizure case in view of Rehman's confessions that the huge arsenal seized in the port city in April 2004 was meant for India's Northeastern rebel group-ULFA and that several BNP and Jamaat leaders were involved.

The massacres in Pilkhana, the BDR Hq was not sudden. The BDR chief Major General Shakeel Ahmed managed to speak twice to Hasina from the barracks after the mutiny started. Processions outside with slogans like BDR-Janata bhai-bhai involved opposition supporters. Hasina alleges the latter even provided vehicles to fleeing mutineers. The JEI which would suffer the most in any 1971 war crimes tribunal is believed to be the main conspirator with the shadow of Pakistan, whose President has appealed to Hasina to defer the trials.

There was also a matter which would have been troubling the Jamaat considerably – the government's decision to scrutinise the activities of NGO's which received approval during the rule of the four party government in which the Jamaat's Secretary General Ali Ahsan Muhammad Mujahid was the State Minister for Social Welfare. A total of 473 local and 25 foreign NGO's were approved during this period against a total of 2367 local and foreign NGO's approved since 1990. According to Bangladesh's Finance Minister AMA Muhith the objective is to find out if these have any links with terror funding. From this there is only a short step to scrutinising the gigantic business and industrial empire the Jamaat controls and which has kept it always flush with funds. In such a situation, the Jamaat can weather the crisis and retain its leadership only if the AL government is removed. Since the latter's massive majority in the Parliament makes a constitutional ouster impossible the only way out is a violent overthrow.

It is important to remember that some of the leaders of the mutineers are said to have been members of the banned Islamist terrorist group the Jamatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Moreover terrorist groups like the JMB, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI BD) are furious with the Army and the Rapid Action Battalion which have spearheaded governmental action against them. Significantly the mutineers at Pilkhana were reported to be looking for Colonel Gulzaruddin Ahmed one of the outstanding officers of the Bangladesh Army who had led the campaign against these organisations and played a key role in the arrest of Bangla Bhai, the operations commander of JMJB and Sheikh Abdur Rehman chief of JMB both of whom were hanged. Colonel Ahmed was killed most savagely.

The mutiny was not a spontaneous explosion of fury, but a carefully planned conspiracy. The Daily Star of 6 Mar 2009, quoting those investigating the mutiny revealed that telephone records of some of the suspects indicated that it was planned at least two months earlier. The FBI, assisting the Bangladesh authorities, is also reported to have said that the mutiny was the result of a conspiracy. The fact that so many Army officers were killed suggests that the aim was to provoke the Army to retaliate in kind potentially leading to countrywide clashes with the BDR. In such a situation there would be imposition of Martial law, facilitating the ouster of the AL government. One must appreciate two things in this drama. The first was the cool and courageous behavior of Sheikh Hasina and second, the leadership of the Army which acted with restraint and stood by the democratically elected

government.

Conclusion

The dangers to Sheikh Hasina, the AL and democratic government of Bangladesh are far from over. The BDR revolt was the first desperate attempt of the Islamic fundamentalist extremists and the Pakistan ISI. They have not given up, although their first attempt has failed. They will try again and again. This time one factor, in favour of Sheikh Hasina and a democratic future for Bangladesh, is that the Army is not with the extremist groups. Over the years, after General Zia ur Rehman allowed the JEI to come back to Bangladesh, the Islamic fundamentalist groups which include the JEI, the Harkut-ul-Jihad-e-Islami (HUJI-BD), the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen (JUM-BD), the Ahle Hadith Andolan (AHD-BD) and the Tablighi Jama'at (TJ) have flourished and grown roots in Bangladesh. Some of them, particularly the JEI, have invested in industries and have enormous economic power. The annual concourse of the TJ in Tongi boasts of a collection of nearly a crore of supporters. Sheikh Hasina will have to tread very carefully, but firmly in the face of this opposition. The saving grace is that in all probability the Army would be loyal to her Government. The Army officers who have close links with the Pakistan ISI have to be watched carefully. The DGFI must be gently but firmly cleansed of all ISI loyalists. The Government of India, while not being too overt, must send assurances from time to time that they are with her. The problems on the Bangladesh border; besides the main pending issues of six odd kilometers of the border yet to be demarcated, the issue of the enclaves and the cases of the adverse possessions should be taken up and resolved without embarrassing Bangladesh. As for helping Bangladesh in handling Islamic fundamentalists, we can help by tracking them when they try to cross over into India, when the pressure builds up in Bangladesh. The Government should set up a cell in the Home Ministry to handle problems in Bangladesh on priority.

***Shri EN Rammohan, IPS (Retd)** is a 1965 Batch Assam Cadre IPS Officer. He retired as Director General of the BSF in Nov 2000. Post retirement he was Adviser to the Governor of Manipur. He has extensive experience of combating insurgency and very close association with the people and Police Forces in the North East.

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