

The People's Republic of Bangladesh was brought into the modern world on December 16th, 1971, just shy of nine months after declaring its independence from West Pakistan. Resembling a premature birth rather than an energetic new state breaking away from West Pakistan, Bangladesh, in reality shares more historical development in common with India, which assisted its independence movement. Looking at the situation in modern Bangladesh one finds the ultimate test case (or basket case).¹ In the eyes of the world community, there is in this sickly child-state, homogeneous demographic and geographic conditions making it a suitable place for attempting experimental development. Additionally, its strategic location, less than or equal to the Falkland Islands, puts it in a neutral position in the politically hierarchy of the world's balance of power. Unfortunately this attempt to reverse the situation in Bangladesh has only slowed its demise and magnified its reputation as a paradise for despair.

These problems facing Bangladesh are also what brings it worldly fame- re-occurring natural disasters, political turmoil, corrupt governance, lack of resources and undereducated populace, astronomical population density place it 140th out of 177 on the Human Development Index. This level should enable it to achieve honorary membership in the African Union.² Situated between two developing economic powerhouses, China and India, and a neighborhood full of Asian economic tigers, has done little to reverse Bangladesh's downward spiral. A contrast in logic exists, a nation enjoying such uniformity demographically should be able to turn itself around.

1 Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson referred to the emerging nation of Bangladesh as "an international basket case," while Henry Kissinger argued that at least it need not be "our basket case." "The Kissinger Tilt." *Time Magazine*, 17 January 1972. available from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,877618,00.html>; accessed 26 September 2008.

2 United Nations Developmental Programme. "Human Development Reports". available from <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>; accessed 27 September 2009.

Examining countries like Japan, Korea, and Germany, which rebounded after having their infrastructures destroyed- why is Bangladesh, in all aspects of its modern development, getting from bad to worse?

As a colonial offshoot, one may take aim at the British Raj, for leaving Bangladesh in its current state. The development under the British did have two major disadvantages, the selection of a regional command city and economic development. In considering the former, Calcutta was chosen by the British over Dhaka as a regional governmental center, and in the latter case, the region was developed only towards the exportation of agricultural products. The war of independence ruined the reliability of Bangladesh as an exporter, causing loss of market share at a critical stage in its modern development. The accepting a system of parliamentary democracy has been a disaster, continuous factionalism leading to a multitude of military coups. Bangladesh politics can be portrayed as seven people arguing over who will drive a car stuck up to the doorhandles in mud, with no one wanting to get out and push it. And the military stands by like a tow truck, its only demand for rendering assistance is the surrendering of ownership. Currently under a state of declared emergency over electoral disputes, a caretaker government (CTG) of unelected officials stand watch as the nation slips away.

Bypassing the domestic issues for now, one may ask why assistance from a variety of international players has not assisted Bangladesh out of its poverty cycle? In 2007 Bangladesh ranked 147th in corruption (tied with the Russian federation) and 107th in global competitiveness and ease of doing business.³ Yet in 2005 received 1.321 billion dollars in foreign aid and has

³Transparency International. *2008 Corruption Perception Index*. accessed 24 September 2008; available from http://www.transparency.org/news_room/in_focus/2008/cpi2008/cpi_2008_table.

over 20,000 non-governmental organizations involved there.⁴ Typically foreign aid vanishes as it seeps into a corrupt bureaucracy. However, the money pouring in has had a completely opposite effect of one might predict in such a corrupt state, funds are bottle necking. The inefficiency of the civil service has money piling up waiting to be spent. Concurrently, it has a balance of payments deficit. Imagine a broken tractor, a stack of replacement parts and sufficient tools while a dozen people stand around not knowing how to read the repair manual. On top of this, is anyone of them qualified to drive it once repaired?

The John Dewey approach of focusing on one problem until it is cured then tackling the next would not be applicable under current conditions in Bangladesh. However, the major challenge in unclogging this self-inflicted problem would be obtaining stable governance. All Bangladesh's major political parties that have had a chance to rule, through a waxing and waning cycle as a majority in the unicameral parliament, the Jatiya Sangsad. The three historically ruling parties are the Awami League (center-left, liberal, secular), Nationalist Party (BNP center-right, religious conservative, nationalist), and the Jatiya Party (founded by military dictator Hossain Mohammad Ershad).⁵ Rather than accept the election results as the will of the people when voted out of power, the opposition attempts to reclaim power by declaring election fraud and subsequent parliamentary boycotts, mass demonstrations and strikes. The use of pre-election violence is a staple of Bengali politics through intimidation, bribes, and lethal violence such as bombing. Accusations of corruption is the number one argument put forth in party against party politics,

⁴The World Factbook. *Bangladesh*. Central Intelligence Agency. available from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html> accessed 24 September 2008.

⁵ Today the Jatiya Party has separated into three separate parties- Ershad, Manju, and Naziur.

yet no matter the who is in the parliamentary majority, Bangladesh's transparency rating remains the same. Such antics, along with violent actions by militant groups, has resulted in multiple bloody military coups and counter-coups in the past four decades.⁶

The upcoming elections in December 2008 are a typical example representing Bengali politics. The transfer of power outside of Western democracies has always been a challenge and to resolve this the Bangladesh government instituted a policy in 1996 labeled Non-Party Care-taker Government into the constitution.⁷ In January 2007 parliamentary elections were supposed to be held but the following chain of events occurred resulting in a seemingly legal coup d'état.

- Ninety days prior to the elections a non-partisan Caretaker Government, a council of ten led by a Chief Advisor, is appointed to ensure free and fair elections. Parliament is hence dissolved.
- The Prime Minister Khaleda Zia from BNP allied with right wing Islamic parties handed over power to a Caretaker Government.⁸
- Iajuddin Ahmed, the BNP President, breaking constitutional rules appoints himself Chief Advisor. Continues to appoint the council members then ignores them.
- Opposition parties, led by mainly the Awami League, call for election postponement suspecting BNP control of Caretaker Government intends to distort elections by fraud.
- Elections are boycotted and mass civil unrest, strikes and protest, occur. Ahmed calls in

6 On August 17th, 2005, over 500 bombs exploded in 300 locations in Bangladesh. The Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) claimed responsibility and is rumored to have ties to Al Qaeda. BBC News. *Bombs explode across Bangladesh*. 17 August 2005. available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/4158478.stm; accessed 25 September 2008.

7 See Appendix II for full text of Chapter IIA, Article 58B.

8 Khaleda Zia in 2006 was rated 33rd out the world's most powerful 100 women by Forbes Magazine. Forbes Magazine. *"The World's 100 Most Powerful Women."* 31 August 2006. available from http://www.forbes.com/lists/2006/11/06women_Khaleda-Zia_JSK7.html; accessed 26 September 2008.

the army to protect elections. International pressure mounts.

- On January 9th, 2008 major election observer groups, mainly the UN and EU, withdraw support for elections.
- Later that day, domestic and international pressures force Ahmed to resign as Chief Advisor of the caretaker Government. Before resigning, Ahmed declares state of emergency under Part XII.141 of constitution.⁹ Such action requires approval of the prime minister, currently non-existent, giving him unilateral power.
- All basic rights of citizens suspended and curfew declared and enforced by military.¹⁰ Over 40,000 individuals are arrested under the new regime.
- State of emergency lasts 120 days, which can be unilaterally extended by Ahmed giving him the possibility continuing rule as a dictator using the constitution. Under these conditions he is not legally accountable to the parliament or people.
- Bangladesh Election Commission recreated February 2007 to resolve problems with electoral fraud. New elections slated for December 2008.¹¹

Bangladesh is on the road to somewhere and the decision to which route is not far off. Today the political scenario is similar to India and Pakistan, the current generation of leaders are descended or related to the countries founders. If this sense of entitlement to rule and the baggage of differences is not soon resolved the current cycle will continue. A growing problem is the despairity between the urban and rural classes. This secondary bottleneck to development is the educational system in Bangladesh, which intended as a cure only exacerbates the problem. The effort being made results in a brain drain from the villages. Education is pulling individuals out of the of rural areas into modern urban life who are most likely never to return. Such a widening rural/urban gap, compounded with other problems such as porous borders and a disgruntled populace practicing a moderate version of Islam, creates a scenario that one has

9 See Appendix I for text.

10 Except the freedom of religion which is exempt under Part Part XII.141B of the constitution.

11 Bangladesh Election Commission. accessed 25 September 2008; available from [http://www.ecs.gov.bd/ English/](http://www.ecs.gov.bd/English/).

witnessed before with the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Micro-loans and eco-tourism may be buzz words to the West, but are of very little consequence to a nation of people without hope leaving on a dollar per day.¹² Claims of six percent economic growth rate and a confident middle class are dwarfed by the overall political circus and economic quagmire.

The long-term solution may be found to the East not to the West. The one party states backed by people's armies such as China, Viet Nam, and Cambodia offer hope as they have modernized their economies and have given their populations a sense of stability, something totally lacking in modern Bengali history. This may cause a loss in human and civil rights but could be the disciplined force to drive Bangladesh forward. Relations with the West have improved with Eastern states that have chosen this single party state model rather than remain in post-colonial structures of government. The secret to Bangladesh's future may lie somewhere in the following two famous quotes: Leopold Senghor's "Human rights start at breakfast" and Benjamin Franklin's "They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety." One is left to conclude the upcoming elections are a toss up using a same-sided coin.

12 "Visit Bangladesh.... Before the tourists come", is the current slogan of the board of tourism.
<http://www.bangladeshtourism.gov.bd/>