

Essay in Paul R. Brass, ed., *Handbook of South Asian Politics: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal* (London: Routledge, 2010), 98-117.

7

Party overinstitutionalization, contestation, and democratic degradation in Bangladesh¹

Harry Blair

[P]olitical parties [controlled in very hierarchical fashion by entrenched leaderships] have monopolized the political process and thus so pervasively penetrated state and organizational life that they have robbed interest groups and other political institutions of their autonomy . . . This extreme domination and institutionalization of political parties . . . has been a central factor in eroding the effectiveness, legitimacy and stability of democracy.

Larry Diamond made these observations about Venezuela's party system in the late 1990s,² but his observations on party "over-institutionalization" could as well have been written about Bangladesh in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Other examples are not hard to find: Colombia in the later 1940s, Pakistan in the 1990s. All ended unhappily. Some terminated severely—a Colombian civil war in the 1950s that killed more than 200,000 people; others came to a halt with less turmoil—a populist Venezuelan autocrat stifling civil liberties; a repressive Pakistani general continuing to postpone a promised democratic restoration in the present decade. The Bangladesh experience has yet to play out, with a military-backed emergency rule declared in January 2007 followed by the

restoration of electoral politics in December 2008 being the latest chapters.

Electoral democracies like those in many developing countries are always incomplete, as Diamond and others point out at some length, but they can function, and some serve as a transitional phase on the way toward liberal democracy and democratic consolidation.³ But where party contestation becomes so entrenched and ferocious that it precludes all other aspects of the polity, a self-destructive pathology can set in. This is what happened in Venezuela, Colombia, and Pakistan, and, by the middle of the present decade, it is what had appeared to have overtaken Bangladesh.

For a while, it looked as if democracy might take permanent hold in Bangladesh following its restoration in 1991. There was a near-death experience for the democratic experiment in 1996, but afterward the two major parties recovered with enough sobriety to agree on an electoral mechanism that steered the system through a first turnover that year and then a second one in 2001. Thus the polity passed Samuel Huntington's "two turnover test"—the ruling party was removed from office by the voters and peacefully turned over charge to its successor not once but twice.⁴

By the beginning of 2007, however, the country's political system appeared headed into

an unstoppable downward spiral when the military intervened to stop the political clock for the third time since independence had been won in 1971.⁵ As always with such takeovers, a quick return to democracy was promised, but within short order the timetable had already been extended to a minimal 18 months before a new national election would be allowed.

How did politics and political parties in Bangladesh come to such a sorry pass? This question will form the central query of this chapter. We begin with a brief account of the origins of the country's principal political parties and their history during the largely authoritarian decades of the 1970s and 1980s. But the main focus will be on the democratic era beginning in 1990, and the debilitating pathologies that came to hobble the political system during that period, paradoxically at a time when the economy was doing quite well for the first time since independence.

Political parties and political history during the first two decades: 1971–1990⁶

The dominant party at Bangladesh's birth was the Awami League (AL), founded in the mid-1950s by Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy. After his death in 1963 the party's leadership passed to the charismatic Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (known generally as Sheikh Mujib or just Mujib), who became the major leader of the provincial autonomy movement for East Bengal within united Pakistan. The movement picked up momentum during the authoritarian rule of Ayub Khan, culminating twice in massive outpourings of protest against rule from the west wing of united Pakistan, interrupted on both occasions by military intervention.⁷ The first time came in 1969 when agitation led by the AL resulted in a crackdown from West Pakistan, imposition of martial law, and the ouster of Ayub, to be replaced by another general, Yahya Khan.

Yahya promised national elections to form a national government that would replace

Ayub's indirect rule scheme, and, in the ensuing poll of December 1970, Mujib's AL won 75 percent of the East Bengal votes and all but two of the province's 162 seats to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly.⁸ This overwhelming victory in the East gave Mujib's party an absolute majority at the national level, but negotiations to form a government soon broke down over how much autonomy the country's eastern wing should get and, on 25 March, 1971, Yahya had Mujib arrested and ordered his army to crack down on the AL. His move immediately led to a bloody civil war between the West Pakistan-dominated army and a pro-independence force composed of those Bengali soldiers who had revolted and allied with a much larger contingent of guerillas, collectively known as the *Mukti Bahini*. The *songram* (struggle or conflict) lasted into December, when the Indian army invaded on behalf of the freedom fighters, captured the provincial capital at Dhaka, and received the surrender of the Pakistan army. Bangladesh became independent on 16 December, 1971.

The AL winners of the 1970 elections (to both the Pakistan National Assembly and the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly) formed the new parliament, which drew up a new constitution creating a Westminster-type parliamentary system and a polity based on the four pillars of *Mujibbad* (Mujibism): nationalism, socialism, secularism, and democracy. New elections held in early 1973 for the *jatiyo sangsad* (parliament) turned out to be a de facto ratification of Mujib's leadership role, awarding the AL some 73 percent of the vote and 292 out of the 300 seats at stake (see Table 7.1).

But by the time of the election, corruption, nepotism, favoritism, and incompetence had seeped into the Mujib regime, and, compounded by a severe and badly mismanaged famine in 1974, popular confidence in the *Bangabandhu* (Friend of Bengal, Mujib's self-assumed title) rapidly eroded, the economy declined and security deteriorated. Mujib responded to the crisis by building a parallel military force alongside the army, declaring a state of emergency in December 1974,

HARRY BLAIR

Table 7.1 Votes and seats in Bangladesh elections, 1973–2001

		1973	1979	1986	1988	1991	1996	2001
AL (Awami League)	Votes	73.2	24.5	26.2		30.1	37.4	40.2
	Seats	97.7	<i>13.0</i>	<i>25.3</i>		<i>29.3</i>	48.7	<i>20.8</i>
BNP (Bangladesh National Party)	Votes		41.2			30.8	33.6	42.3
	Seats		69.0			46.7	38.7	64.1
JP (Jatiya Party)	Votes			42.3	83.7	11.9	16.4	6.5
	Seats			51.0	68.4	11.7	10.6	4.7
JI (Jamaat-i-Islam)	Votes			4.6		12.1	8.6	4.2
	Seats			3.3		6.0	1.0	5.7
Others and independents	Votes	26.8	34.3	26.9	16.3	15.1	4.0	6.8
	Seats	2.3	<i>18.0</i>	<i>20.4</i>	<i>31.6</i>	6.3	1.0	<i>4.7</i>

Notes: 1996 results pertain to the June election of that year, not the repudiated February election. Figures are in percentages; votes in normal typeface, seats *in italics*, ruling party or alliance in boldface.

Source: Nizam Ahmed, "Bangladesh," in Dieter Nohlen, Florian Grotz and Christof Hartmann (eds), *Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook*, vol. 1, *Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 515–52; Nizam Ahmed and Sheikh Z. Ahmad, "The parliamentary elections in Bangladesh, October 2001," *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2003), pp. 503–509

nationalizing the major newspapers and, the next month, amending the Constitution to make himself head of a presidential system of government. He then abolished all political parties in favor of a new one of his own and in effect declared the country his personal fiefdom. In democratization terms, Bangladesh took a rapid downward tumble, as is reflected in the Freedom House scores for political rights and civil liberties (see Figure 7.1). Reaction was not long in coming, and, in mid-August 1975, a group of army officers organized a coup in which Mujib and most of his family were assassinated.

A period of uncertainty followed, replete with coups and countercoups, but within a few months, General Ziaur Rahman (known as Zia), who had been a hero in the *songram*, emerged as leader of a military-headed government. After surviving several coup attempts, Zia tried popularizing his rule, founding a political party that became the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), and contesting a presidential election in 1978 as well as a parliamentary election in 1979, both of which he won handily (see Table 7.1). There were, of course, charges of poll rigging, but evidence indicates that Zia proved able to transform himself into a genuinely popular

leader by the end of the 1970s. Democratization measures reflected this change, as indicated in Figure 7.1.

Unrest continued to infest the military, however, resulting in Zia's assassination in May 1981. His vice president, Abdus Sattar, succeeded him in office and then won a mandate on his own in a presidential election held in November of the same year. But his victory proved to be short-lived, as a new general, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, seized power in a bloodless coup the following March.

Like Zia before him, Ershad launched a political organization, the Jatiya Party, and in the spring of 1986 held a parliamentary election. The BNP, now headed by Zia's widow Khaleda, boycotted the poll, but under the leadership of Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wajid, the AL, which had been cooperating with the BNP in opposing the Ershad regime, broke ranks with it, and decided to contest amid cries of betrayal from the BNP side. The ensuing election saw the Jatiya Party win a bare majority of the parliamentary seats, but the victory was enough to give a patina of legitimacy to the Ershad government. The AL took about a quarter of the seats (see Table 7.1), but then boycotted the parliament. An addition to the political spectrum this time was the

OVERINSTITUTIONALIZATION, CONTESTATION, AND DEMOCRATIC DEGRADATION

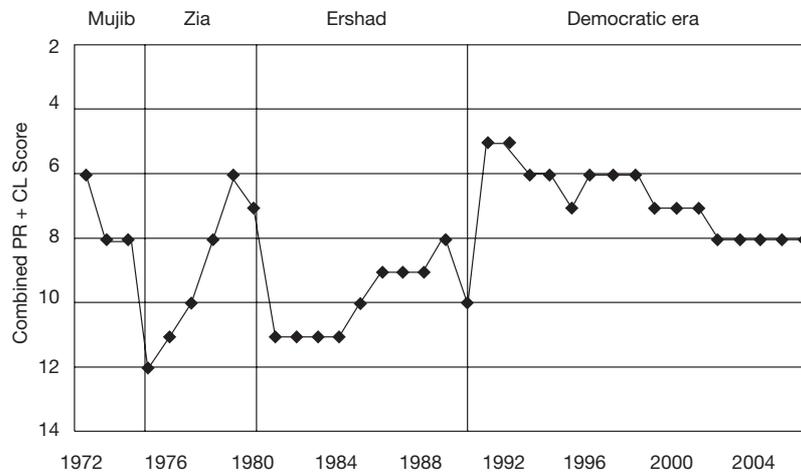


Figure 7.1 Bangladesh Freedom House democracy scores, 1972–2006.

Note: PR = Political Rights. CL = Civil Liberties. Each score ranges from 1 (most democratic) to 7 (least democratic). When combined, the scores thus range from 2 to 14.

fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islam, which had been banned as a collaborationist organization after the civil war but which Ershad allowed to resume. It won only ten seats.

Despite winning what were essentially uncontested presidential and parliamentary elections in October 1986 and March 1988 respectively—the AL and BNP boycotted both campaigns—the Jatiya Party never matured into anything more solid. Opposition intensified with frequent processions, demonstrations, and *hartals* (strikes) which at times shut down Dhaka for several days running.⁹ This drama ebbed and flowed over the Ershad years, rising to a crescendo in late 1990, when an expanding movement composed of political parties, student groups, professional associations, non-governmental organizations, trade unions and government workers demanded Ershad's resignation. In a scenario reminiscent of Ferdinand Marcos' ouster in the Philippines several years before, Ershad was rebuffed by the military when he attempted to impose martial law and resigned office on 4 December, 1990.

An interim caretaker government was set up to superintend a new election, which was held in February 1991, ushering in a period of almost 16 years of what might be called

“punctuated democracy,” in which more or less free and fair national elections were held,¹⁰ and the print media were essentially free, but a virtually total hostility between the two major parties almost completely debilitated political life, corroded the bureaucracy, encouraged corruption, and fostered criminal behavior to the point of gangsterism. In democratization terms, the period began on a highly optimistic note but soon began declining, as is reflected in Figure 7.1. Exploring this pathology will take up the bulk of this chapter, but first it would be appropriate to sum up the condition of the political parties at the outset of the democratic era.

Party ideologies and practical differences

In 1972 when it took power, the AL adopted a somewhat vague ideology centering around the “four pillars of *mujibbad*” noted earlier. It saw itself as the party spearheading the drive for independence from Pakistan, placed the industry and banks owned by Pakistanis under state control, emphasized the Bengali aspect of the country's character rather than its Muslim

HARRY BLAIR

dimension, and professed popular sovereignty in contrast with the military dictatorships that had dominated Pakistan for most of the time since Partition in 1947. In addition, largely because India had offered refuge to its leadership cadres during the 1971 civil war and had secured Bangladesh's independence with its military intervention, the AL looked to India as an ally rather than as an antagonist. And it was less friendly toward the US, which had, after all, sided with Pakistan during the civil war.

For its part, the BNP at its birth in the late 1970s emphasized the Bangladeshi nationalist aspect of the new country, as opposed to its Bengali cultural character. It expressed no interest in socialism, neither was it much concerned with secularism (which meant essentially the fate of the minority Hindu population). It was "democratic" in the sense that, like the AL, it demanded elections and was willing to support civil liberties while evincing little enthusiasm for transparency or the rule of law. In contrast with the AL, it looked on India with some hostility but with relative favor on the United States.

When it came into existence, in 1986, H. M. Ershad's Jatiya Party more resembled the BNP in its ideology, but tried to play the Muslim card slightly more strongly by declaring Islam the state religion (although not proclaiming Bangladesh to be an Islamic state) in 1988. As the fourth party of consequence, the Jamaat-i-Islam projected a very conservative Islamic ideology and pro-Pakistan political stance when it was allowed to resume operations in 1986.

By the 1990s, however, differences between the two major parties had largely disappeared in practice, although they continued to surface rhetorically as the BNP would accuse the AL of being beholden to India, which would be countered with charges that the BNP was oppressing Hindus. The real difference between the major parties was not ideological at all but personal, in the form of the enmity between the "two begums"—party leaders Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. Hasina built her life and her party around an obsession with

avenging her father's murder, convinced that Zia had a hand in it and that Khaleda was an apologist for his complicity. Khaleda saw herself as continuing the legacy left by her husband and duty-bound to oppose the opportunist megalomania displayed by Sheikh Mujib in his later days and (in Khaleda's eyes) replicated by his daughter when she agreed to contest the 1986 parliamentary elections allied with Ershad. The two leaders cooperated rarely, as in the campaign to oust Ershad in the late 1980s and during the first days after the 1991 election; otherwise they remained implacable enemies, continuously "at daggers drawn" in the subcontinental English idiom.

Lower-level leaders, party loyalists, and camp followers in these two top-down organizations had successively less ideological inclination as time went on, working mainly for the rewards of power and patronage. Neither party showed any inclination toward intraparty democracy, with upward loyalty being the strongest requirement for participation in party affairs.

The Jatiya Party and Jamaat-i-Islam both hung on into the new era, but very definitely in a subordinate role. The Jatiya became a regional enterprise, strong in Rangpur (Ershad's home district) and Sylhet but almost non-existent elsewhere, while the Jamaat managed to establish something of a regional base in the Khulna region. The Jatiya Party, never very strong on ideology in power, became even less so in opposition, but uncompromising Islam continued to be the Jamaat's principal *raison d'être*.¹¹

Launching the democratic era

After Ershad's ouster in December 1990, the combined opposition parties agreed on Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as a caretaker president to preside over a new election, held in February 1991. Although the two major parties were extremely close in the popular vote (see Table 7.1), the BNP won 140 of the 300 seats at stake, far more than the AL's 88, but

not enough to form a government, so it pulled the Jamaat (18 seats) into a coalition—a portent of things to come in the next decade.

In an initial—although, as it turned out, brief—show of comity, the two major parties agreed to change the constitution to replace the presidential system with a parliamentary model. After that, cooperation broke down, and, by the spring of 1994, a dispute over a by-election precipitated an opposition boycott of parliament and then the obstructionism and paralysis that came to plague the political system thenceforward. The AL and the minor opposition parties initiated demonstrations, processions, and *hartals* reminiscent of the final months of the Ershad dictatorship, in the hope of bringing about a similar outcome: a collapse of public confidence in the government, desertion of its supporters, and (probably, although this was not articulated) a military decision to intervene and start the political clock again with a new national election.

This scenario failed to unfold, but the opposition was not deterred, and the major cities continued to be roiled with strikes and shutdowns. As the five-year lifetime for the incumbent parliament began to reach its end, the AL focused its demands on a caretaker government to supervise the upcoming elections, employing the model established during the interim between the Ershad government's collapse in December 1990 and the election held the following February. Posturing on both sides precluded any compromise, and an election was held in February 1996 with the opposition boycotting. Voters boycotted as well, with a turnout estimated at 5–10 percent. Although the unopposed BNP won almost all the seats, the outcry at home and abroad proved so strenuous and embarrassing that Khaleda agreed to a neutral caretaker regime, which supervised an election held in June and widely regarded as free and fair.¹² In the June election (see Table 7.1), the AL won 146 of the 300 seats, as against 116 for the BNP, and it allied with the Jatiya Party (whose leader Ershad was in jail) to form the government. As the AL did in 1991, so too in 1996 the BNP protested the

results as unfair and rigged, but this time the BNP did not wait as long to launch processions, demonstrations, and *hartals* that disrupted social and economic life throughout the country.¹³ As the BNP did before it, while in power, now the AL shut out the opposition from any role except that of raising trouble in the streets.

In 2001 the AL government came to the end of its five-year maximum lifetime, and turned over state power to a new caretaker government, now made standard procedure through a constitutional amendment passed shortly after the 1996 election. This time the BNP won substantially (see Table 7.1), taking 64 percent of the seats and attaining, in combination with its electoral ally the Jamaat (which won 17 seats or almost 6 percent) a supermajority sufficient to amend the constitution over the objections of the opposition.¹⁴ True to form, the AL claimed fraud, rejecting the results and initially refusing to take its seats in the new parliament. Later, party leaders did allow their newly elected MPs to join the parliament, but soon returned to the “politics of the streets,” replete with the same processions, demonstrations, and *hartals* that the BNP had deployed against it previously. The AL continued essentially the same disruptive behavior right down to the time the next election was to be held in January 2007.¹⁵

Flouting “the rules of the game” or following different rules?

One frequently heard during the three successive democratically elected governments in 1991–2007 that both ruling party and opposition conspicuously failed to follow “the rules of the game” prescribed for a Westminster political system.¹⁶ The party in power totally excluded the opposition from any role in politics and used the power of the state, in particular the police, to harass and undermine it in every possible way. For its part, the opposition used every possible means short of outright insurrection to disrupt normal life, to provoke the state into retaliating with force. The political scene—and indeed the economic

HARRY BLAIR

and social scene—was continually interrupted, often seemingly without any rules of behavior.

In fact, however, there was in place a very definite—but never publicly articulated—set of rules for the political game, well understood by the parties, the police, and general public. The rules were more or less as follows:¹⁷

- Elections are more or less free and fair. Considerable fraud (ballot box stuffing, bogus voting, manipulation of voters' lists, etc.) occurs, and some parliamentary seats undoubtedly go to the wrong candidate, but the overall outcome is legitimate.
- Election winners take all political power, leaving nothing for the opposition party. Once in power, the ruling party enjoys a mandate to do essentially whatever it wants over the next five years, which generally means fostering corruption, skimming foreign aid, diverting contracts to relatives, and the like. The police become a political arm of the ruling party, which uses them to harass the opposition, break up opposition rallies while protecting its own, and so on.
- The opposition party claims that the election was rigged and launches an intermittent five-year campaign of disruption. It boycotts parliament, mobilizes huge processions, shuts down the major urban areas with *hartals*, demands that the government resign, and calls for its overthrow. But there are distinct limits on the agitation. The opposition rants and raves, but never really mounts the barricades or engages in actual insurrectionary activities. Instead, its purpose is to call attention to itself as a viable alternative in a system where it has no other way to generate publicity.
- Parties develop extensive networks of thugs on call generally known as *mastaans*, who act as enforcers. The *mastaans* support themselves through exacting protection money and "tolls" from merchants and contractors, under the patronage of their party bosses. Needless to say, *mastaans* identifying with the ruling party do better than those allied with the opposition, for they can operate under the protection (and often with the connivance) of the police.
- Both major parties (as well as the minor parties, to the extent that they are able) endeavor to commandeer organized life in Bangladesh, politicizing professional associations, trade unions, and most notoriously the universities. All these sectors become colonized by party "panels," that is, associations affiliated with one party or another. On university campuses, gangsters infiltrate the associations, and gunfights become common.
- Press freedom exists (with some harassment of journalists), although the print media are weak in investigative journalism, fact checking, and the like. A generally unrecognized factor in freedom for the print media is their small circulation (especially the English language media), which reaches only the elite strata. Radio remains a state monopoly, and while there are several independent TV stations, their efforts at news have not progressed beyond the embryonic stage. Even so, the media do bring into public debate many of the worst excesses of government and parties.
- An independent higher court system gives some protection to political rights and civil liberties, though access tends to be restricted to those who can afford to lodge complaints with it, and this protection does not extend to the lower court system, which has continued since colonial times to be part of the executive branch and is thus subject to direction from the law ministry. Still, the safeguards maintained by the high court and supreme court do provide a significant warning that limits exist on what the state can do to impede or obstruct political participation.
- A new cycle begins with each successive election. The opposition that has been making its case through the cacophonous protest of the street will have a reasonably fair chance at the ballot box to oust the incumbent regime. After the election, the

losing side will replicate the obstructionism exercised by the opposition in the previous cycle.

These *de facto* rules of the game were observed for the most part through the 1991–2007 period, and they gave the political system a certain degree of popular legitimacy. After a turnout of 55 percent in the 1991 national election, the second (i.e., the valid) election of 1996 saw 75 percent of the electorate vote, a figure duplicated almost exactly in the 2001 election. Some of the large turnout can surely be explained by ballot box stuffing, but most of it appears to reflect a genuine popular interest in political participation. A 2004 survey, for example, found fully 80 percent of respondents saying they would vote in the next election.¹⁸ But, though they maintained the system, the rules contained an inherent instability, given the strong incentives for the ruling party to tilt the game in its favor. Indeed, it was just such an attempt on the part of the BNP in the 1996 election that led the AL to resort to its only remaining weapon, a boycott of the election, which, in turn, led to instituting the caretaker setup. Beginning part way through the BNP's second term in power, signs began to appear that the game was unraveling again.

A metastasizing pathology: The run-up to 2007

Within a couple of years of the 2001 election, evidence began to accumulate that the BNP was again yielding to the temptation to reconfigure the *de facto* rules to give it an unimpeded route to victory in the next election, which constitutionally would have to come by the beginning of 2007. There were several symptoms of the unfolding pathology.¹⁹

To the average citizen, undoubtedly the most distressing signs of the deterioration were the increase in violence and criminal behavior, manifested in extortion (often referred to as “tolls”), kidnappings, campus violence, death threats, cinema house fire bombings, and the

like. In many ways, it seemed that the *mastaans*, as often as not in alliance with the police, had taken charge of public life.²⁰ On occasion, the state did more than symbolically condemn the violence. Responding to intense criticism, the ruling BNP ordered the army to crack down on criminal elements in “Operation Clean Heart,” which lasted from October 2002 to the following January. Thousands were rounded up, reports of human rights abuses mushroomed, crime rates went down briefly (whether because the perpetrators had been arrested or were just lying low for a while was never clear), the army was given amnesty for any excesses committed, and crime rates shortly resumed their upward climb. The nexus between the *mastaans* and the politicians was evidently not interrupted for long, if at all.²¹

Violence affected the political sphere directly as well. In May 2004 Ahsanullah Master, a prominent Awami League MP, was assassinated in broad daylight, followed later the same month by a bomb attack on the British high commissioner. The next January, Shah A. M. S. Kibria, an Awami Leaguer and former finance minister, was assassinated.²² These high-profile incidents apart, numerous lower ranking party operatives were also killed, on both sides.

Islamic fundamentalism became wrapped up in the violence also. On 17 August, 2005 over 400 small bombs went off in 63 of the country's 64 districts within the space of an hour. Carefully planned to minimize harm (only three people were killed) while broadcasting the existence of a countrywide network, the attack seized worldwide attention.²³ A group calling itself Jamaat ul-Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB or Assembly of Holy Warriors of Bangladesh) claimed responsibility in leaflets distributed at the time. Shortly afterward, several suicide bombers, apparently from the same group, targeted the judiciary, setting off bombs in courthouses and killing perhaps two dozen people.²⁴

Most notoriously, during this time an Islamist militant calling himself Bangla Bhai (Brother of Bengal) set up operations as a local

HARRY BLAIR

religious warlord in the countryside near Rajshahi, imposing dress codes (burqas for women and beards for men), enforcing daily prayers and Ramadan fasting rules, torturing malingers, and executing opponents in public displays. Although he gave interviews to journalists, the government claimed alternately that either he did not exist or that he could not be located.²⁵ It seemed clear that Bangla Bhai was getting local police protection, and there was much speculation that his ideas of justice found favor with BNP bosses, who were anxious to co-opt any challenge from the religious right by adding an active Islamic militant tone to the alliance they had built with the Jamaat from the 2001 election onward.²⁶ International concern mounted and pressure grew on the government to rein him in, fanned by a feature story in the *New York Times Magazine*, appearing in January 2005.²⁷

Over a year later, in March 2006, the government finally moved in to arrest him and other militant leaders, claiming a major triumph for an act that could easily have taken place a year or two sooner.²⁸ Violence did diminish after the crackdown, but few believed that Islamist militancy had withered away. Rather, the speculation was that the movement's members were lying low, hoping that a BNP return to power after the 2007 elections would free their leaders.²⁹

Less dramatic but likely portending a more profound long-term impact, *madrasahs* expanded rapidly in Bangladesh during the first part of the present decade, growing with state support by 22 percent between 2001 and 2005, as against a 10 percent growth in state schools over the same period.³⁰ But it was widely believed that most of the support for them came not from the public budget but from the Persian Gulf, in particular from Saudi Arabia, which was also thought to be bankrolling the Jamaat and perhaps even JMB and Bangla Bhai.

Politicization of the bureaucracy proceeded apace. Whereas earlier some officers had sided with one party or another, there were significant numbers who remained neutral, still adhering to the esprit de corps of the Civil

Service of Pakistan members (the "CSP-wallahs") who signed on with the independence cause in 1971 and became the inner core of the Bangladesh bureaucracy. By the early 2000s, however, there were few if any bureaucrats left who had not joined (or been forced to join) one side or the other.³¹

The bureaucratic politicization facilitated corruption by making it easier for government officials and political leaders to work together in siphoning off funds from the public purse. With the ruling party exercising an uncontrolled (and between elections unaccountable) access to procurement, regulation of the economy, and the police power, corruption expanded. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, when it began including Bangladesh annually in 2001, ranked the country as globally most corrupt and then continued it in last place for five years running—an unparalleled achievement during the Index's lifetime. Finally, in 2006, the Index "graduated" Bangladesh to the third place from last out of 163.³² The World Bank's *Governance Matters* report for 2007 gave Bangladesh a slightly more generous ranking among the more than 200 countries ranked—a berth in the 4.9 percentile—but its rating system showed the country declining more or less steadily from the 35th percentile in 1996 to its 4.9 rating in 2006.³³

Along with the bureaucracy's politicization came a similar calamity within the NGO community—actually a greater tragedy, in a sense, because the NGOs had maintained their neutrality more or less untainted by politics for much longer. With few exceptions, the NGO sector had retreated from politics after some unhappy experiments in the flush of new independence in the 1970s to an almost exclusively service delivery mode for the 1980s and 1990s. There were exceptions. On two occasions in particular, the sector had entered the political arena through its apex organization, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), once in 1990 to join the movement to oust the Ershad regime and then again in 1996 to protest the

OVERINSTITUTIONALIZATION, CONTESTATION, AND DEMOCRATIC DEGRADATION

bogus election in February of that year.³⁴ Otherwise, it had stayed clear, working its own terrain quite successfully.

In 2003, however, the second largest NGO in Bangladesh, Proshika, was accused by the BNP government of having embarked on an outright political campaign on behalf of the AL. Many in the NGO sector thought the charges were in significant degree (if by no means completely) true, and left ADAB (of which Proshika's president had then assumed the presidency by rotation) under the leadership of BRAC (the largest single NGO in the country) to form a new apex body, now called the Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB). Inasmuch as Proshika and ADAB were perceived to be pro-AL, the new FNB came to be seen by many as a BNP front. The NGO sector's neutrality (and not a little of its legitimacy, which had remained very high as long as it refrained from politics) had been lost.³⁵ With the politicization of the NGOs, it seemed that there was no sector of public life that had not been sucked into the maelstrom of the parties.

The mechanics of elections also came to be perceived as badly compromised. In early May 2004, the BNP, relying on the help of the Jamaat-i-Islam for a two-thirds parliamentary majority, passed the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which specified *inter alia* that the mandatory retirement age for the chief justice of the supreme court would be extended from 65 to 67 years of age. This seemingly innocuous change had huge implications for the next national election, for the 13th Amendment passed after the 1996 election had declared that the Chief Adviser (i.e., administrator) of a caretaker government superintending the hiatus between parliaments would be the most recently retired chief justice. Advancing the retirement age meant that by the time of the 2007 election, the incumbent chief justice would not have retired and so his predecessor, widely recognized as a BNP partisan, would take over the chief advisor post and be in a position to condone

electoral malpractice, if not actually manipulate it himself.

A second source of concern with election mechanics arose in May 2006 with the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner. The BNP government's appointee and his deputies were generally believed to be BNP sympathizers, and the election commission was soon charged with padding the voters' rolls by adding millions of bogus names.³⁶ In addition, the government was alleged to have stacked the election deck through secondments of pro-BNP officers to supervise the elections themselves.³⁷

When the time came in October 2006 for the BNP government to step down and turn over charge to a caretaker administration until the January 2007 election, the AL raised a storm of opposition to retired Chief Justice K. M. Hasan's becoming Chief Adviser. Bowing to the pressure, Hasan withdrew, and after some jockeying President Iajuddin Ahmed appointed himself to the post. Agitation then shifted to the election commission, and after a month the President (and now chief advisor) announced that the chief election commissioner would go on leave until after the election, which was to be held on 22 January, 2007.

Along with these manoeuvres, the protests, demonstrations and counterdemonstrations continued, with the AL playing its last card, announcing that it would boycott the election and organize a "siege program" against the government, at which point three-fifths of the parliamentary candidates withdrew their candidacies.³⁸ In early January, matters were clearly building toward a crisis, and the donor community made strenuous representations to the caretaker government concerning the dangers of an uncontested election and a breakdown of the polity. The American Embassy and British High Commission, along with the European Union issued strong statements, the American ambassador pronounced a one-sided election unacceptable, and international election-monitoring bodies

HARRY BLAIR

declared they would not act as observers for a flawed poll.³⁹

Then, on 11 January, three things happened. Envoys from the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, the European Commission, Canada and Australia all held closed-door meetings with both the AL and BNP alliances. The United Nations resident coordinator announced that Bangladesh participation in future UN peacekeeping operations could be jeopardized if the military supported a one-sided election.⁴⁰ And President Iajuddin Ahmed declared a state of emergency while at the same time announcing that he was resigning his position as chief adviser to the caretaker government.⁴¹ The next day, Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former governor of the Bangladesh central bank, took office as chief adviser to the caretaker government.

Within a few days, it became widely known that the military had masterminded the sudden change,⁴² with the UN letter (or at least the sentiments behind it) thought to be a major precipitating factor. Bangladesh had for some years been a major supplier of UN peacekeeping troops; in January 2007, the country had about 9,000 on UN duty, roughly 8 percent of active duty army strength.⁴³ The special pay and allowances the military received for its UN tasks had come to form a major part of its perquisites and would have been difficult indeed to give up.⁴⁴

The military-backed caretaker regime shut down public political party activity and arrested leading politicians from the major parties with accusations of various criminal activities, but it steered clear of declaring martial law and allowed fairly open press freedom (although the press appeared to avoid any direct criticism of the military, perhaps practicing a degree of self-censorship). At one point the caretaker government moved to exile Khaleda Zia and prevent Sheikh Hasina's return from abroad, replicating, in effect, Pervez Musharraf's actions against Pakistan's two feuding ex-prime ministers, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, but a combination of domestic and international pressure led the

government to back down, and the "two begums" were not banned, although open politicking was not allowed to resume. Elections were postponed indefinitely, and eventually the government declared they would be held in December 2008, holding that it would take that long to establish a new voters' registration system based on ID cards.

In February, Mohammed Yunus, founder-director of the world-renowned Grameen Bank and 2006 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, publicly floated the idea of starting a new political party, but finding support lukewarm, he had dropped the project by May.⁴⁵ Bangla Bhai was convicted and executed in April, more than a year after his arrest, and Islamist militancy appeared to have taken a holiday for the duration of the caretaker regime, at least for its first several months. General Moeen U. Ahmed, the army chief of staff, declared on numerous occasions his intent to return the country to democratically elected civilian rule, yet he also mused publicly about the need for Bangladesh to have its "own brand of democracy."⁴⁶ But, as the months wore on, popular speculation increased about the likelihood of the Bangladesh military following the example of General Musharraf in Pakistan, who was by the summer of 2007 in his eighth year of power.

Discussion

The management of the polity in Bangladesh has gone through several distinct phases.⁴⁷ The first phase, illustrated in Figure 7.2, lasted a full 19 years, from Independence in December 1971 until the ouster of the Ershad dictatorship in December 1990. The bureaucracy, led by the "CSP-wallahs" carried over from the Civil Service of Pakistan, formed the centerpiece, operating in a partnership with either the ruling party elite or the military. The "either . . . or" term is key here, for the bureaucracy had only one partner at a time. Initially, it was the Mujib regime and then most of the time thereafter the military, though

OVERINSTITUTIONALIZATION, CONTESTATION, AND DEMOCRATIC DEGRADATION

part way into the Zia era, the BNP basically displaced it as Zia transformed his authoritarian rule into a more popular one. Ershad attempted the same kind of transformation with his Jatiya Party, but never succeeded. Over the whole period, the bureaucracy remained at the center: strategic policy decisions might be made by the political or military managers, but owing to its experience at operating the state's machinery, the bureaucracy was critical and at times the dominant partner in the management of state affairs. As for the NGOs, although a number of them got their start with social change agendas in the early 1970s, within a few years they had largely concluded that trying to introduce fundamental change into the socioeconomic structure was too difficult and so reverted to a neutral service delivery role.

Essentially the same pattern prevailed at the outset of the democratic era in 1991, now with the political class and the bureaucracy aligned. The military stayed out of the picture, even during the critical period of the first 1996 election, when most elements of civil society (including the major NGOs) did involve themselves. As the enmity between the two

major parties began to strain the political system, however, especially after 2001, the picture changed, as shown in Figure 7.3. The political class had subordinated the bureaucracy by dividing it into factions allied to the main parties, and it had begun to make similar inroads into the hitherto neutral NGO community. The military continued to remain outside the political sphere, enjoying a gradually rising budget along with the perquisites and monetary rewards of being among the top two or three providers of UN peace-keeping forces.

In 2007, the picture changed to that depicted in Figure 7.4. After the emergency proclaimed in January, the military formed the caretaker government and provided broad policy instructions to it (although presumably allowing it considerable latitude). In turn, the caretaker government directed the bureaucracy while totally sidelining the political class. Relations between the military/caretaker government and the NGO sector remained uncertain.

Ultimately, the military followed through on its repeated promises to turn over charge to a democratically elected government by the



Figure 7.2 Bureaucracy + one ally, NGOs outside, 1972–1991

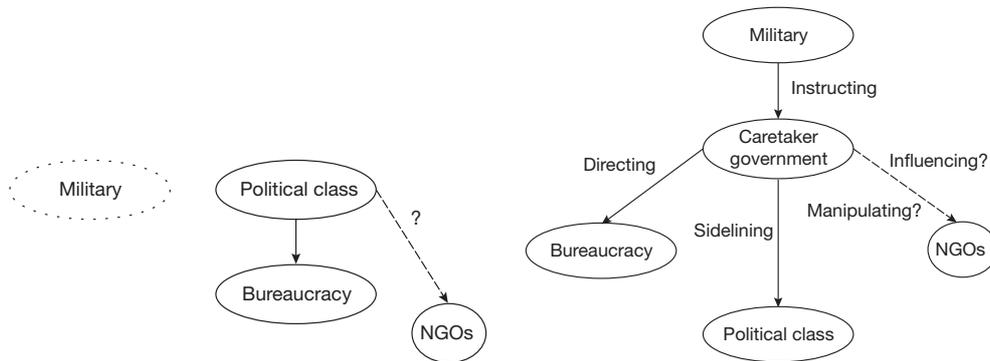


Figure 7.3 Military distracted, bureaucracy subordinated, NGOs likewise?, early 2000s

Figure 7.4 Military in charge, others subordinated, 2007

HARRY BLAIR

end of 2008. It did not succumb to a temptation to follow the Musharraf route and find ways to hang onto power, even long past any semblance of popular support.⁴⁸ At least three factors would seem to have argued against long-term military control of the polity, two of them acts of the regime and the third a long-term pattern. First, the caretaker government committed itself to separating the judicial from the executive branch. In India, the two functions have long been separated, but Bangladesh followed the path it had inherited from Pakistan and, before it, Britain, in that it maintained the lower judiciary⁴⁹ under the executive branch through the law ministry. Although the constitution specified a separation for the entire judiciary, and the supreme court had required it, successive governments had found it expedient to maintain control over the lower branches.⁵⁰ In May 2007 the Supreme Court again required a separation, but this time the caretaker government appeared to take the order seriously, and in November 2007 the caretaker government did, in fact, order the lower judiciary separated.⁵¹

Second, the caretaker regime launched the massive process of establishing a totally new voter registration system with individual ID cards, a move that indicated a degree of seriousness not exhibited by any previous government.

Third, the military has nothing like the cosseted status enjoyed by Pakistan's defense establishment over the years—a privileged position the military there would go to serious lengths to protect. Bangladesh's military has had budgetary support rising at the same level as GNP during the present decade, similar to the pattern in Pakistan. But this has meant about 1.4 percent of the gross domestic product while Pakistan's military was being allotted 3.5 percent—about two-and-a-half times as much—and Pakistan's GDP in 2006 was roughly twice that of Bangladesh, so the military rested on a much larger base. In addition, there is the huge economic enterprise that Pakistan's military has built up, consisting of industries, banks and businesses, all funneling in

their profits to the military.⁵² Beyond that, Pakistan has become the beneficiary of an immense US government largesse in the post 9/11 era, to the extent of some US\$ 10 billion by the beginning of 2007. The likelihood is that this generosity will continue for some time to come, given American dependence on Pakistan in connection with its ongoing operations in neighboring Afghanistan.⁵³ In short, the Bangladesh military has nothing like the vested interest in maintaining control of the political system to feed its own demands that exists in Pakistan.

The developmental paradox

In spite of corruption, unaccountability, and frequent disruptions caused by the many *hartals*, Bangladesh enjoyed a long period of economic growth during the years after the democratic restoration in 1991, especially in agriculture, which still absorbs roughly half the active labor force. In marked contrast with the country's earlier years, when it was often referred to in terms of Henry Kissinger's reported "international basket case" remark, Bangladesh began to do quite well economically. Over the period since 1990, foodgrain production grew significantly, rising from about 18–19 million tons to more than 28 million tons in 2006–07. In the process, food availability per capita rose from about 0.46 kg/day to at least 0.55 kg by the middle of the present decade. In consequence, foodgrain prices dropped in Bangladesh as elsewhere in the world over this time. Meanwhile, growing off-farm economic activity in sectors like transportation, construction, retailing, and small enterprises generally were exerting an upward pressure on wages. Between the late 1980s and 2000, the proportion of rural workers whose primary occupation was in agriculture dropped from 66 percent to less than 48 percent, while those working mainly outside agriculture rose from 34 percent to 52 percent—a quite remarkable shift. Not surprisingly, agricultural wages (generally the baseline measure of rural welfare for the bottom strata) rose, and the

OVERINSTITUTIONALIZATION, CONTESTATION, AND DEMOCRATIC DEGRADATION

terms of rental for agricultural land moved in favor of the tenant/sharecropper.⁵⁴

A good part of the explanation for these favorable trends has to be accounted for by food policy reforms adopted in the late 1980s and continued in the early 1990s, including privatizing inputs like tubewells and fertilizers, allowing international foodgrain trading, investing in infrastructure (especially transportation), paring back subsidies in the food sector, and supporting microcredit institutions. Donor pressure, reinforced by decreasing foreign aid helped induce the state to take up these reforms, many of which were elements of the “Washington Consensus” then in vogue in the international development community. But the reforms also found a ready partner in the BNP and Awami League governments in power. For, during this time, the state increased its own revenue by about the same level that had been lost in foreign aid—roughly 2 percent of GDP.⁵⁵ In other words, the state could have afforded to continue with its subsidies but chose instead to undertake a reform path.

While all these economic trends were unfolding, Bangladesh became something of a poster child in family planning circles as its crude birth rate dropped by about one-third. Total fertility rate, which had earlier dropped from an estimated 6.3 in the mid-1970s to 5.1 by the end of the 1980s, continued to decrease in the 1990s to 3.3 by 2000—still well above replacement level (a rate of 2.2), but showing substantial advancement along the demographic transition. Much of the explanation for such progress lies in the changing economics of household management, as the benefits of child labor declined in an increasingly non-agricultural economy while the costs of childrearing increased. But state commitment to family planning had to play a strong role.⁵⁶ In addition, child mortality decreased and primary education increased.

As the decade wore on, the Bangladesh economic boom began to unravel. Fertilizer shortages began to appear, and rice prices began to creep upward. The poverty rate, which had decreased from 68 percent to 44

percent between 1988 and 2004, had returned to 55 percent by 2008.⁵⁷ Still, the good times had a long run before beginning to sag.

How could all these beneficial developments have happened with such misgovernance at the helm of the polity, where almost every measure of good governance in the World Bank’s reckoning ranked among the world’s lowest?⁵⁸ A large, energetic, and effective NGO sector working in agricultural extension, education, health, and microcredit can explain a good part of the country’s success here,⁵⁹ but there is more than a smattering of paradox. At the least one is moved to ponder whether good governance in the sense of accountable democratic management of the state’s business is necessary in the short or even middle run.

Conclusion

Bangladesh has had several chances to develop a viable political party system since achieving its independence in 1971. So far, the country’s political leaders have squandered them all in their obsession to demolish opposition parties and sequester all the spoils of office for themselves. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman turned 1971’s promise of a democratic *Sonar Bangla*⁶⁰ into a one-party dictatorship in 1975. The BNP’s blatantly rigged February 1996 election virtually ended the democratic experiment of 1991 before rescue came in the form of the caretaker government scheme. And the BNP’s attempts at rigging the 2007 election led in the end to the military-supported emergency declared in January of that year.

Can a genuine multiparty system ever take hold in Bangladesh? Can the perverse and degraded “rules of the game” that guided politics from 1991 to 2007 be replaced by something approximating a genuine Westminster model? Perhaps the 18-month emergency rule that ended with elections in December 2008 can begin seriously to separate the *mastaans* from the parties and from the police, depoliticize the bureaucracy and the NGO sector,

HARRY BLAIR

curb corruption, and defuse the militant Islamist threat. The multitude of tasks seems overwhelming, but even to achieve significant success in just a couple of these spheres might be sufficient to set a “virtuous cycle” into motion. If so, a country that has managed to attain a very respectable rate of economic growth under severe malgovernance in recent years might well become a real development success story.

Postscript

In December 2008 the Caretaker Government made good on its promise to hold a national election, which took place on the 29th of the month. Amid intense international attention and under the scrutiny of a large deployment of foreign and domestic monitors (the author served as a member of the National Democratic Institute’s team), a peaceful and orderly election transpired. Some 70.5 million voters went to the polls (87 percent of those registered, a record turnout). The results surprised virtually everyone, not least the political parties themselves. The Awami League captured fully 49.0 percent of the vote, translating into 230 seats or 76.7 percent of the total—the largest majority since Sheikh Mujib’s victory in 1973 just after independence. The BNP won only 32.7 percent of the vote, giving it 29 seats or 9.7 percent.

The BNP’s loss was so stunning—“tsunami” was the word most frequently used to describe it—and the verdict of the monitors so uniform as to the election’s fairness that the party lodged only minor claims of fraud and rigging, turning quickly to a mode of self-reflection on how to regroup and reposition itself. A row soon developed over seating in the new parliament and the BNP began boycotting, but the efforts seemed only half-hearted as the party licked its wounds. At the end of February 2009, two months after the election, it was not clear whether the BNP would use its time in the political wilderness to refashion itself as the British Labour Party did after its successive drubbings at the hands of Margaret Thatcher in

the 1980s (and the Canadian Conservatives did after being reduced to two seats in the country’s 1992 elections), or whether it would return to the politics of disruption and obstruction as had been the norm for losing parties over the previous 18 years. To say that the better part of Bangladesh’s political future rides on the BNP’s decision would not be an overstatement.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based largely on my own experience of some 20 visits to Bangladesh beginning in April 1973, with the most recent ending in June 2004. My work there as an academic and a consultant has been sponsored by Cornell University, the Department for International Development (UK), the Ford Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, the Swedish International Development Authority, the United States Agency for International Development, and the World Bank, to all of which I am most grateful. I would also like to thank C. Christine Fair of RAND and Nawreen Sattar of Yale for comments. None of these organizations or individuals bears any responsibility for the interpretations and views expressed here, which are my own.
- 2 Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 96–97, referencing Michael Coppedge, *Strong Parties and Lame Ducks: Presidential Partyarchy and Factionalism in Venezuela* (Stanford, CA: University Press, 1994).
- 3 “Electoral democracies” refer to countries that do have regular elections with real competition, but fall far short when it comes to other critical components of democracy such as civil liberties, guaranteed minority rights, and the like. “Liberal democracy” requires an absence of unaccountable actors (especially the military) and the presence of horizontal accountability between major actors (e.g., executive and legislature), extensive provisions establishing pluralism, and perhaps most importantly the “rule of law” guaranteeing political rights and civil liberties through an independent judiciary. See Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, for an extensive analysis; also Larry Diamond,

OVERINSTITUTIONALIZATION, CONTESTATION, AND DEMOCRATIC DEGRADATION

- “Thinking about Hybrid Regimes: Elections without Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002), pp. 21–35. “Democratic consolidation” can be said to obtain when all significant actors in a political system—winners and losers—accept democracy as “the only game in town” (see Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 5–6). On the incompleteness of democracy, in addition to Diamond’s works just cited, see for instance Guillermo O’Donnell, “The Perpetual Crises of Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2007), pp. 5–11.
- 4 See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 266ff.
 - 5 The first time came after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s assassination in 1975; the second occurred with the coup that brought General Hussein Muhammad Ershad to power in 1982.
 - 6 There are many accounts of this period. Three very good ones are Craig Baxter, *Bangladesh: From a Nation to a State* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); Lawrence Ziring, *Bangladesh from Mujib to Ershad: An Interpretive Study* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1992); and Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath*, 2nd edn (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1988). Except where noted, most of this section on the 1971–90 period has been taken from these three sources.
 - 7 For an analysis of the two sequences, the first leading to a change in Pakistan’s government and the second to the disintegration of Pakistan itself, see Harry Blair, “Sheikh Mujib and Déjà vu in East Bengal: The Tragedies of 25 March,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 6, No. 52 (1971), pp. 2,555–62.
 - 8 In contrast with West Pakistan and its four provinces, East Pakistan consisted solely of the province of East Bengal, so the two designations were used interchangeably.
 - 9 On *hartals* and their political uses, see M. Rashiduzzaman, “Political Unrest and Democracy in Bangladesh,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (1997), pp. 254–68.
 - 10 With one very notable but ultimately redeemed exception, the national election of February 1996, about which more later on.
 - 11 On the place of Islamic parties in Bangladesh, see Ali Riaz, “Islamist Parties and Democracy in Bangladesh,” paper prepared for annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 30 August–2 September, 2007.
 - 12 For an account of the two 1996 elections, see Zillur R. Khan, “Bangladesh’s Experiments with Parliamentary Democracy,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 6 (1997), pp. 575–89; also Stanley Kochanek, “Bangladesh in 1996: The 25th Year of Independence,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1997), pp. 136–42.
 - 13 See Rashiduzzaman, “Political Unrest,” on the quick resumption of *hartals* after the 1996 election.
 - 14 In return for joining the ruling alliance, the Jamaat received two important portfolios, agriculture and social welfare. In the election itself, the BNP won only 2 percent more of the popular vote than the AL, as shown in Table 7.1.
 - 15 The saga can be tracked most easily in *Asian Survey’s* annual recap of Bangladesh politics published in its first issue each year, e.g., M. Rashiduzzaman, “Bangladesh in 2001: The Election and a New Political Reality?” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2002), pp. 183–91, and Rounaq Jahan, “Bangladesh in 2003: Vibrant Democracy or Destructive Politics,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2004), pp. 56–61.
 - 16 See, e.g., N. Ahmed and Sheikh Z. Ahmad, “The Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh, October 2001,” *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (4 September, 2003), pp. 503–509.
 - 17 This account of the “rules” is based largely on Harry Blair, Robert Charlick, Rezaul Haque, Manzoor Hasan and Nazmul Lalimullah, “Democracy and Governance: Strategic Assessment of Bangladesh,” report for USAID, Bangladesh (Burlington, VT: ARD, Inc., October 2004). But see also Rehman Sobhan, “Structural Dimensions of Malgovernance in Bangladesh,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39 (4 September, 2004), pp. 4,101–08.
 - 18 See Associates in Rural Development, “Bangladesh: Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices: National Survey Covering Democracy and Governance Issues” (Burlington, VT: ARD, Inc., for USAID/Bangladesh, 2004).
 - 19 There have been several insightful overviews of the decline. See, inter alia, Mohammad Mohabbat Khan, “State of Governance in Bangladesh,” *The Round Table*, 370 (July 2003), pp. 391–405; Rehman Sobhan, “Structural

HARRY BLAIR

- Dimensions of Malgovernance"; also Moazzem Hossain, "Bangladesh: 'Home-Grown' Democracy," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41 (2006), pp. 791–93. The account given in the present essay is based in large measure on Blair *et al.*, "Democracy and Governance? Strategic Assessment of Bangladesh."
- 20 At times the police substituted for the *mastaans*. One account of the Eid season in 2005 reported that a heavy presence of uniformed police to keep order during Eid had displaced the usual extortionists from retail business establishments in Dhaka but had filled in the gap by charging their own "tolls" on the vendors. See Shaheem Mollah, "Cops in Extortionists' Role on Streets: Regular Thugs Stay Away in Fear of Rab," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), 1 November, 2005.
- 21 For a perceptive analysis of the linkages between *mastaans* and politics in rural Bangladesh, see Joe Devine, "Wellbeing, Democracy and Political Violence in Bangladesh," paper for the 57th Political Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Bath, UK, 11–13 April, 2007.
- 22 Despite rhetorical demands from the prime minister to find the culprits, no one was ever apprehended.
- 23 See, for instance, Associated Press, "Concerted Bombs Hit 100 Bangladesh Sites," *New York Times*, 18 August, 2005; Nora Boustany, "Bombings Force Bangladesh Envoy Home," *Washington Post*, 19 August, 2005; and Raekha Prasad, "Cities Shaken by 350 Co-ordinated Attacks," *The Times* (London), 18 August, 2005.
- 24 See David Montero and Somini Sengupta, "Bangladesh Blast Kills 1 and Hurts 100: 3rd Attack in Days on Legal System," *New York Times*, 2 December, 2005; also Rounaq Jahan, "Bangladesh in 2005: Standing at a Crossroads," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2006), pp. 107–13.
- 25 See the several accounts in the Dhaka *Daily Star* at the time of his capture <http://www.the.dailystar.net/2006/03/07/d6030701011.htm> (accessed 10 August, 2007).
- 26 For a detailed account of the machinations apparently involved, see International Crisis Group, "Bangladesh Today," Asia Report No. 121 (Brussels: ICG, 23 October, 2006).
- 27 See Eliza Griswold, "The Next Islamist Revolution?" *New York Times Magazine*, 23 January, 2005.
- 28 Julfikar Ali Manik and Shamim Ashraf, "Tyrant Bangla Bhai Finally Captured," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), 7 March, 2006.
- 29 After his arrest in March 2006, the BNP government did not press a legal prosecution up to the time of its leaving office in October.
- 30 See Rejaul Karim Byron and Shameen Mahmud, "Madrassas Mushroom with State Favour," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), 4 August, 2005.
- 31 For an assessment of trends in relations between politicians and bureaucrats since 1971, see Ahmed Shafiqul Huque and M. Taiabur Rahman, "From Domination to Alliance: Shifting Strategies and Accumulation of Power by the Bureaucracy of Bangladesh," *Public Organization Review: A Global Journal*, 3 (2003), pp. 403–18.
- 32 There were many ties at the bottom of the scale, so that Bangladesh actually shared the third from bottom rank with three other countries in 2006. Burma, Guinea, and Iraq tied for next to bottom, and Haiti rested by itself in last place. See Transparency International "Corruption Perceptions Index 2006," annual publication available at <http://www.transparency.org>. For further details, see the chapter by Kochanek in this volume.
- 33 See Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Massimo Mastruzzi, *Governance Matters VI: Aggregate and Individual Governance Indicators 1996–2006*, World Bank Policy Research Paper 4280 (Washington: World Bank, July 2007). Actually, Bangladesh had fallen to the 4.9th percentile in 2004, then showed an uptick to 7.8 in 2005 before settling back to the 4.9 level in 2006.
- 34 The NGO sector had also involved itself in political decision making during the Ershad regime when the latter sought to establish control over the sector in the mid-1980s. And there were at least a couple of prominent NGOs that did become involved in local level politics quite explicitly, viz., Gonoshahajjo Sangstha, which sponsored specific candidates in local elections, and Nijera Kori, which explicitly pursued advocacy for social change at village level. On the latter prospect, see Harry Blair, "Civil Society and Pro-poor Initiatives at the Local Level in Bangladesh: Finding a Workable Strategy," *World Development*, Vol. 33, No. 6 (2005), pp. 921–36.
- 35 Data from interviews. See also World Bank, "Bangladesh Economics and Governance of Nongovernmental Organizations in Bangladesh," Report No. 35861-BD

OVERINSTITUTIONALIZATION, CONTESTATION, AND DEMOCRATIC DEGRADATION

- (Washington: World Bank, 16 April, 2006); and S. M. Nurul Alam, "Whose Public Action? Analyzing Inter-sectoral Collaboration for Service Delivery" (Dhaka: International Development Department, 2007).
- 36 The voters' list prepared in 2006 contained about 10 million more names than demographic estimates based on the last census could support, according to a pre-election assessment team preparing for international monitoring, headed by ex-US senator Thomas Daschle and sponsored by the National Democratic Institute (see National Democratic Institute, "Report of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) pre-election delegation to Bangladesh's 2006/07 Parliamentary Elections" (Dhaka: NDI, 11 September, 2006), p. 6. Also International Crisis Group, "Bangladesh Today;" and Karim and Fair, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads." The Election Commission ignored High Court rulings to remedy the inaccuracies. See Pavithra Banavar and Nicholas Howenstein, "The Future of Democracy in Bangladesh," USIPeace Briefing (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, March 2007).
- 37 As in other South Asian countries, the state posts ("seconds") large numbers of government servants temporarily to conduct elections as returning officers, ballot counters, security guards, etc. For the 2001 election, the Awami League as ruling party was generally believed to have attempted the same approach, moving a party sympathizer into the presidency and chief adviser positions, as well as posting its bureaucratic favorites into slots where they could supervise the polling and ballot counting. These efforts notwithstanding, however, the AL lost the election, and proceeded to claim that it had been rigged.
- 38 *Daily Star* (Dhaka), 4 January, 2007 (several stories). Some 2,370 out of 3,935 parliamentary candidates were said to have withdrawn (*ibid.*).
- 39 See *Daily Star* (Dhaka), "US, UK, EC disappointed," 4 January, 2007; "Act Swiftly, Impartially to Create Conditions for All-Party Polls, US Urges CG," 6 January, 2007; "One-sided Polls won't be Credible, Acceptable, says US Envoy," 9 January, 2007; "EU Poll Mission May not Go Ahead if Crisis Persists," 11 January, 2007; "NDI, IRI won't Watch Jan 22 Elections," 11 January, 2007.
- 40 The resident coordinator's letter came in the form of a press release, so it attained maximum publicity. See Renata Lok Dessallien, "Press Statement by UN Resident Coordinator, Ms Renata Lok Dessallien, Dhaka," Media release (Dhaka: Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh, 11 January, 2007).
- 41 The two daily newspapers *Daily Star* and *New Age* provided detailed coverage of the tumultuous period during early January as these various threads were unfolding. See web page archives at www.thedailystar.net and www.newagebd.com. A good summary of the international pressure can be found in Nazrul Islam, "Military Role May Bear on Dhaka's Peacekeeping," *New Age* (Dhaka), 12 January, 2007.
- 42 See Jo Johnson's articles in the *Financial Times* (London), on 15 and 17 January, 2007: "Ex-bank chief heads Bangladesh government," and "Bangladesh generals plan anti-corruption drive: The military leaders now controlling the government in Dhaka want to cleanse the political system." The Bangladesh press did not note any army involvement with the emergency until some days later, although it was surely understood.
- 43 Data from UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations. See United Nations, "Contributions to United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, as of 31 January, 2007." The Bangladesh contingent amounted to about one-eighth of all UN troops on peacekeeping service in January 2007. Total army size from International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, 107 (London: IISS, January 2007).
- 44 There is some question about how serious the UN would have been about cutting back or eliminating Bangladesh as a peacekeeper. After all, Pervez Musharraf's 1999 coup and establishment of a dictatorship did not lead to any penalties on peacekeeping assignments. Pakistan maintained roughly the same number of peacekeeping troops in the field as Bangladesh. All this was known to the Bangladesh military, of course, and raises the question as to whether the army took advantage of the uncertainty created by the letter to launch the declaration of emergency.
- 45 See Muhammad Yunus, "Yunus' second letter," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), 23 February, 2007; "Yunus writes letter to all," *ibid.*, 4 May, 2007.

HARRY BLAIR

- 46 On returning to democratic government and denying political ambitions, see e.g., *Daily Star* (Dhaka), "Moeen again Rules out Army's Role in Politics," 13 August, 2007; and "Moeen says Polls by 2008 end," 18 August, 2007; also "Moeen says Army has no Plan for Martial Law," 24 May, 2007. For an example of Moeen's speculation about governance, see *New Age* (Dhaka), "Army Chief calls for 'Own Brand of Democracy,'" 3 April, 2007. For a good general overview of political events over the emergency period, see Economist Intelligence Unit, "Bangladesh Country Report, April 2007" (London: EIU, 2007); and "Bangladesh Country Report, July 2007" (London: EIU, 2007).
- 47 The discussion here represents a further elaboration and development of thinking I began in Blair, "Politics, Civil Society and Governance in Bangladesh" and continued in Blair *et al.*, "Democracy and Governance: Strategic Assessment of Bangladesh."
- 48 For an example of the speculation on this question, see Farid Bakht, "Army Entrenches Itself in Bangladesh," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 29 (2007), pp. 2,991–92.
- 49 The lower judiciary comprises the entire court system save for the supreme court and high court, which had become independent during the Pakistan period and continued this status through successive governments since the 1972 Constitution. But as in other countries, the higher courts hear only a minute percentage of the total cases.
- 50 The supreme court, presumably anxious to avoid direct confrontation, continued allowing extensions for the government to comply with the constitutional requirement. The twenty-first such extension, for example, was allowed in October 2005.
- 51 Julfikar Ali Manik, "Judiciary Freed from the Executive Fetters Today," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), 1 November, 2007.
- 52 See Ayesha Siddiq, *Military Inc. Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2007). The Bangladesh military has some business operations as well, but they are small scale compared to those in Pakistan. See Siddiq, *ibid.*, p. 50; also *New Age* (Dhaka), "Gen Moeen contradicts law adviser," 29 August, 2007.
- 53 Data on budgetary allotments from International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, 102 (2002) and 107 (2007). (London: IISS). For an account of US military aid to Pakistan, see Craig Cohen and Derek Chollet, "When \$10 Billion Is Not Enough: Rethinking U.S. Strategy toward Pakistan," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2007), pp. 7–19.
- 54 These developments are presented and analyzed in an excellent series of articles in *Economic and Political Weekly* edited by Isher Ahluwalia and Wahiduddin Mahmud, "Economic Transformation and Social Development in Bangladesh," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39 (2004), pp. 4,009–52. See, in particular, Raisuddin Ahmed, "Rice Economy of Bangladesh: Progress and Prospects," *EPW*, 4,043–52; Paul A. Dorosh, "Trade, Food Aid and Food Security: Evolving Rice and Wheat Markets," *EPW*, 4,033–42; and Mahabub Hossain, "Rural Non-Farm Economy: Evidence from Household Surveys," *EPW*, 4,053–58. Some data in this paragraph were derived from the website maintained by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics: <http://www.bbs.gov.bd/>. The agricultural side is analyzed in greater detail in Raisuddin Ahmed, Steven Haggblade, and Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury (eds), *Out of the Shadow of Famine: Evolving Food Markets and Food Policy in Bangladesh* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). Some of the political impact of these trends at local level are explored in Blair, "Civil Society and Pro-poor Initiatives at the Local Level in Bangladesh."
- 55 See Wahiduddin Mahmed, "Macroeconomic Management: From Stabilization to Growth?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39 (2004), pp. 4023–32.
- 56 Considerable argument exists as to whether a changing economic calculus or family planning intervention played the greater role here. See Simeen Mahmud, "Health and Population: Making Progress under Poverty," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39 (2004), pp. 4,081–91; and Shihidur R. Khandker and M. Abdul Latif, "The Role of Family Planning and Targeted Credit Programs in Demographic Change in Bangladesh," World Bank Discussion Paper No. 337 (Washington: World Bank, 1996).
- 57 For a summary of these less happy trends, see Abdul Bayes, "Beneath the Surface: Why is the Price of Rice Still so High?" *Daily Star*, 24 August, 2008.
- 58 The conundrum is aptly summed up in Shantayanan Devarajan, "Two Comments on 'Governance Indicators: Where Are We, Where

OVERINSTITUTIONALIZATION, CONTESTATION, AND DEMOCRATIC DEGRADATION

- Should We Be Going?’ by Daniel Kaufmann and Aart Kraay,” *World Bank Research Observer*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2008), pp. 31–6.
- 59 On the NGO sector as a formidable engine of development, see Sajjad Zohir, “NGO Sector in Bangladesh: An Overview,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39 (2004), pp. 4,109–13.
- 60 “Golden Bengal”—the title of a poem by Rabindranath Tagore and the country’s national anthem.