

FOCUS

Voice of Conscience

INTERVIEW of ASMA JAHANGIR by Matiur Rahman

Asma Jahangir is former Chairperson of Pakistan's Human Rights Commission and United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Extra-judicial Killing. Matiur Rahman, Editor of the *Prothom Alo*, interviewed her on 5 November at Delhi. She has spoken frankly on the heinous genocide committed by Pakistan Army in 1971, what the government of her country should do in this regard, current political situation in Pakistan and other matters in this exclusive interview.

MATIUR Rahman (MR): Thank you for your latest reactions on the statement of the Pakistan diplomat in Dhaka on our Liberation War of 1971. Would you say something about it?

AJ: Of course. As you recall, Mr Mazhar Ali Khan was in jail. Mr I.A. Rahman here was sent to jail. Mr Naqib Hossain was sent to jail. My own father was in Awami League and in jail at that point. So I think when I talked about it, I thought that in my own way, I was saying to him, who is not anymore there, that you were right and you did the right thing and that is the legacy that you leave me that you have to speak up in difficult times if you know that it is justice that you are talking about and the truth.

MR: We have come to know that there are demands in the newspapers and among personalities like you human rights commissions, for apology for those crimes committed in 1971, and this is very encouraging for us. There is also a movement now in our country demanding apology from the Pakistani government.

AJ: Well, you know, there is something which I think I should say to you. I have an institutional memory of history and I have seen the kind of reaction that were there in West Pakistan during the army action and it has sometimes amazed me how propaganda can actually make people believe in their own lies. And this was one of those moments of history. I saw in our part of Pakistan people actually believing that they could crush the people's will and for them it was war and not the aspiration of the people that was important. So I think the Haidarullah Rahman Commission Report was a vindication of all those few people in West Pakistan who were, at that point, telling the truth, who went to jail for telling the truth, who were called traitors for telling the truth, who suffered for telling the truth. And for them to know that it was not only the truth that they were telling. They had a vision of what was going to happen. And they were truthfully the leaders rather

than the ones who believed in destruction.

MR: So you want to say that even before the publication of the report, there were voices against the torture and genocide?

AJ: Of course. As you recall, Mr Mazhar Ali Khan was in jail. Mr I.A. Rahman here was sent to jail. Mr Naqib Hossain was sent to jail. My own father was in Awami League and in jail at that point. So I think when I talked about it, I thought that in my own way, I was saying to him, who is not anymore there, that you were right and you did the right thing and that is the legacy that you leave me that you have to speak up in difficult times if you know that it is justice that you are talking about and the truth.

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side by side and I am glad that there has been this other group who, like ourselves, will continue to follow human rights principles. And there is another group which has also been there in Pakistan always who consider that an apology is not necessary and anybody who talks about apology is being a traitor to the country. So we have these two forces and the rest of the country is a silent spectator.

MR: Coming back to politics, could you tell me a little about the political situation of your country after taking it over by the military chief General Musharraf?

AJ: The reversal of democracy has hurt Pakistan a lot because we don't have a direction. And when you derail any system, no matter how rickety it is, you are in fact ensuring that you will never get back to track. And that is

have not had remarkable politicians which is absolutely there, everyone can see it. But in a country that has been under military rule for more than half its life, you don't expect wise people to be thrown up through that oppression. We have not been lucky like South Africa. You don't get Nelson Mandelas every day. But if you compare our politicians to other politicians of the region, you couldn't say they were any worse or any better.

However, it is a very interesting thing that you must look into. In our country there is widespread propaganda that all politicians are corrupt. But if you look at Pakistan, there was Liaquat Ali Khan who had no charges of corruption. We had Suhrawardy no charges of corruption. We had Mohammed Ali Bogra no charges of corruption. Chowdhury

we had good practices that we could transport to you, but, however, experience can be of different nature. And I have watched that any process of democracy which is not backed by an effective independent judicial system, cannot be sustained. So if Bangladesh really needs anything, it is more democracy rather than any less of it. There will come a time when people will get fed up of confrontation, of polarisation and a third force will be thrown up. But the people have to be very patient because it is such a painful process. It is easy to find democracy, but it is very difficult to sustain it.

MR: This process is taking a painfully long time. What we see in the top is the most important. Unless there are a sensible and good people, it is very difficult to sustain democracy.

AJ: Well, good people can make it smoother and bad people or inefficient people or ineffective people or corrupt people can actually bring a lot of frustration in society and that is where more trouble begins to start. I see your problem. It is very fragile. It is something that is not taking root as such and perhaps because of the personality clashes rather than the will of the people to continue.

We have also learnt, and I think our leaders have learnt this time around, that respect for your opponent in politics is a very important thing.

MR: Tolerance?

AJ: Tolerance. In fact I think that opposition is very relevant in new democracies because they can play a very positive role as well. And if the government is not willing to accommodate them, they are actually hurting their own interests in the long term because people will not be able to take it far too long.

MR: How is Musharraf going to organise or strengthen his power? Is he going for a new party? If not, how is he going to create his political base? Do you have any idea?

AJ: Well, I can only analyse it. I don't have any links to the government, only through what they are doing. And it is the same manual being rerun because they will have local body elections which will be on partyless basis, which will be controlled because of a ban on political activity and it will be done piecemeal. So they will find a few new faces, new leaderships at the grassroots level to consolidate the GHQ and that will be taken up to the provincial level and to the central level. This manual may have worked well or for a period of time for other military government, but I have my sincere doubts that it will work this time because they also plan to change the Constitution and bring in a national defence committee, inducting the army, bringing the army into politics. Well, if you have guns and you have an army, they can make you do anything. But there is obviously no cooperation by the civil society as such and by the people. They are just watching and with great resentment at what is happening and it will just not work.

MR: We are reading in the newspapers that all the political parties will be grouped together. Can you see any prospect? Can they build up any movement?

AJ: I think it is positive that at least they are with one voice saying that we will not ask for the army ever to come to power, which has happened in the past. Secondly, I think that is also for us, and we are planning to build public pressure on this alliance that they must come with a code of conduct this time and there must be some minimum agenda that they agree to so that if ever they return to power, then we don't face the same hurdles and road blocks as we did in the past. We are going to have a meeting of some people who have political experience to put down some points and then pressurise this group to adopt some of those points so that there is a critical entry point into the politics of Pakistan where you begin to change, unwind the system again.

MR: The last question I have gone through an article by an American, Stephen Cohen, a famous expert on South Asian region. He said that there was a solution in Pakistan and that could be achieved by a sort of coalition between the military and the civilians. Do you agree?

AJ: Well, I think that Mr Cohen should probably give that advice to his own government. I mean, there cannot be freedom for Americans and no freedom for Pakistanis simply because one was born in America and another was born in another soil because every human being, and if they believe that, is equal and every human being has the same aspirations, then freedom is as dear to us as it is for an American.

MR: Now, say something for my Bangladeshi readers.

AJ: I think that what I would like to say is that for me it is not so much nationalities and nations that matter, but the people that live within them. To me the greatest loss of East Pakistan going away was the fact that we became more intolerant. There were secular winds blowing from the East to us and those winds kept some of us breathing. They stopped. I think I would like to say that.

MR: Thank you.

MR: What is the mood of the people or the media in general on these issues?

AJ: Well, at this time Pakistan is going through a mini crisis so the people are in great despair. So it is not an issue in Pakistan at all. There are of course two extreme people there who live

what has happened in Pakistan. We see no way out now. We are looking and groping for a way out. We have always believed that you have to start the process of democracy which is, in the beginning, only through electoral process, but it's not the end. It's just a tiny step and we had only taken that tiny step in the shadow of a powerful military. And even that one step has now been uprooted. So where do we begin that process again is a very big question. And as you know, no self-respecting society can live without political parties and representation of the people themselves.

We are also a bit worried because the military does not have the skills of governance that you require so much now. It is not Cold War where military governments are given bags of money. So the previous notion and military was affiliated with law and order and prosperity, people have seen that this has not happened this time. The law and order situation is bad and economically we have suffered. People are beginning to link for the first time, military government with poverty and that, in a way, in the long term perhaps, is better for Pakistan. But in the short term, we think that we will have to go through maybe a very rickety, maybe a very despairing process and then get back to some kind of a drawing board where we will be able to come to some sort of a consensus as to where we are heading.

MR: Is it to blame the politicians,

the successive governments elected by the people for all these?

Have they failed to deliver a minimum democratic situation or to do some good for the people and other things?

AJ: You see, the point is I am not apportioning blame to anybody. I am apportioning blame to ourselves because we let it happen. But please try and understand some thing. Though we

Mohammed Ali no charges of corruption, I.A. Chaudhury no charges of corruption. Firoz Khan Noon no charges of corruption. Mr Bhutto no charges of corruption, monetary corruption. And when did corruption begin? It was institutionalised by the army itself. Corrupt practices started with the army. And if Mr Nawaz Sharif was corrupt, he learnt it from his masters. So the most corrupt people are the Generals of Pakistan Army. Yes, there are a few politicians who are corrupt. But then even Habib Jali was a politician. He died in a room four feet by six feet. Even my father was a politician who was left with nothing except his house when he died and was born into much more wealth. Mr I.A. Rahman has been in politics. He has the modest way of living and one of the most honest people that I know. So which politicians are they talking about? They are talking about a handful of politicians who are corrupt. They are corrupt and it is indefensible. But to paint them with one brush is not easy.

Secondly, in Pakistan, no civilian power has been able to stay. The longest that anybody has stayed has been Mr Bhutto. And he had to pay the price for it by being hanged. So we have not actually had a proper civilian government. We have had civilians who have been ruling under the control and influence of the army.

MR: The army still remains at the helm of power, and for some more time they will continue to rule, as I understand. We had the similar experience, going through being a part of Pakistan, then we had our own military governments. The same thing happened here too. Of course, we are continuing with the democratic process, but we are facing also political unrest, economic poverty, pressure on women and other such things. So where is the way out? What should we do?

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