

Snake snaps in fear!

TAHSEEN ALAM CHOUDHURY

I am scheduled to leave for Dhaka this week. I have got my ticket confirmed, though after a toilsome effort, and am all set to start. But a news item flashing regularly in the dailies pulls me back from my journey. The arresting frenzy in Dhaka appears to be a great awe for many frequent visitors to Dhaka like me. Besides the inmates of my family begin to show me some tense and terror-gripped faces and consequently I have to cancel the trip. Then it sharply comes to my mind that earlier when I made some visits to Dhaka, I used to be aware of the goons and muggers and from this time on ward I will be truly careful about police, the 'puppets of the government' in guise of so-called law preservers.

Snake snaps in fear because when it sees any body around, it

becomes afraid of an imminent attack and so to save itself from that assumed attack it bites. So is the case with our government. It finds everybody around as its rival, as its foe and so begins to snap like a 'venomous serpent in fear'. From a school going minor boy to a middle-aged day labourer, nobody gets spared from its halting spree. The malicious atrocity of the cops and mindless arrest of the guiltless people, to some extent, profanes the sanctity of universal humanity.

Our opposition comes to the headline with a whimsical declaration of the deadline of government's fall by April 30, 2004. In my view no trace of reason and logic prevails in such kind of decision. It sounds quite ridiculous. This kind of announcement breeds nothing but some tension and confrontation in national life. And the frenzied attitude of government is a direct sequel to this

kind of provocation. Who suffer as a result? Only the opposition workers? No, the entire nation. Politics is a game of sagacity; one has to be politically discreet to fight back his/her opponent in this game. Emotions, imaginations do not belong to it.

Awami League scheme to hem in 'Hawa Bhaban' on the 21st of this month and BNP also chalked out a counter programme to siege 'Shudha Sadan' around the same time. But surprisingly enough BNP postponing that siege took up an administrative stand to foil opposition's programme. What makes them do so? The most palpable cause of this step is that if they made blockade around 'Shudha Sadan', whom would they get arrested that time? The party men? That may be a rare scene in our present political scenario.

On the eve of opposition's 'No Confidence' movement the gov-

ernment has resorted to hyperbolic measure to fill in the cells with prisoners. The different police stations in Dhaka are spilling with detainees. By April 30 Dhaka may be turned in to a desolate city. You get out of bus, you will be put behind the bars; you embark on the railway platform, you will be ushered in to police van.... What an unprecedented example of mass treatment by our democratically and fairly elected government! News reporting of a satellite channel airs a pungent bargain between the opposition lawmakers and the cops over a female demonstrator who is seen to be snatched and dragged by the police. Now may I dare put a question to our government that will all these oppressive acts turn 'No Confidence' in to 'Confidence'?

Politics should be employed for human welfare and human welfare

signifies the mass of progress of a country. But unfortunately we have never been able to realise this fact ever since we got our independence. How long does it take for our politicians to be conscious of the real significance of politics? Or are they pretending to be ignorant for their personal gain? I don't suggest them to be super human but I do implore them to be human at least. We have had enough of the mud-slinging game of both government and opposition. No more this fruitless wrangle. It is time for all of us to wake up from our pretentious slumber to shed off all the so-called political grudges with a view to constructing an ideal Bangladesh we always dream of.

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Rationale for independence

Filling the gaps in facts and interpretations

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

ANY years ago, a Pakistani colleague in an international organization I worked for was reminiscing how he travelled around Dhaka and other places of the then East Pakistan in the 1960s and could see only a few forlorn signboards of industrial enterprises but no industries. Then he said to me, "Now I realize why you wanted separation from Pakistan." Today I wonder how many people in Bangladesh care to remember or know why. To many minds, it looks as though the birth of the country has no history at all. The void in perceptions of the political struggle that led to the emergence of Bangladesh is large; it is even larger when it comes to understanding the economic realities that underlined the struggle. Making of a Nation is a major contribution to the filling of the latter void. And it achieves much besides.

The genesis of discontent from the unequal partnership between the two wings of Pakistan can be traced to the mid-1950s, not long after the beginning of the language movement early in the decade that proved to be the first step to Bangladesh statehood. The story is told in fascinating detail by Nurul Islam, eminent economist, former professor at Dhaka University, Director of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Deputy Chairman of Bangladesh Planning Commission, and Assistant Director-General in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Dissatisfaction with the creeping pace of economic development of the eastern wing of the country found its first academic expression in a report of a conference of East Pakistani economists organized to elicit views on the first Five Year Plan (1956-1960). The report of the conference, held in August 1956 and reproduced in the book, called for the need to conceive of the economy of Pakistan "as consisting of two economic units" for purposes of development planning, while recognizing that "for certain purposes, for example, mobilisation of internal and external financial resources, the country could be considered as a single economy." The report not only emphasized the concept of two economies for the purpose of accelerated development of the eastern wing, but also spelled out the first steps to its implementation. The signatories of the report included noted economists of the time, Nurul Islam among them, and almost all of them my teachers at Dhaka University, where I had finished my post-graduate economics the year before.

The slim report, and later work by economists on the questions of "two economies" and economic disparity between the two wings and subsequent political developments so well described in the book, reminded me once again of the famous saying of Keynes: "[The] ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist."

From that point on, things moved faster and farther than is usually perceived. Soon after assuming power in a military coup in 1958, Ayub Khan turned his attention to economic development of the country. The Field Marshal must have been hugely amused in his private moments by the Bengali economists' arguments when they reached him. But he did meet some of these economists and heard them out. On his suggestion, a small group of economists, which included the author, submitted a memorandum which again elaborated on the rationale of treating the economy of the country as two economies. No more was heard of the memo. But the arguments were kept alive and elaborated in various forms in a number of forums: in the Price Commission of 1960, for example, the two Finance

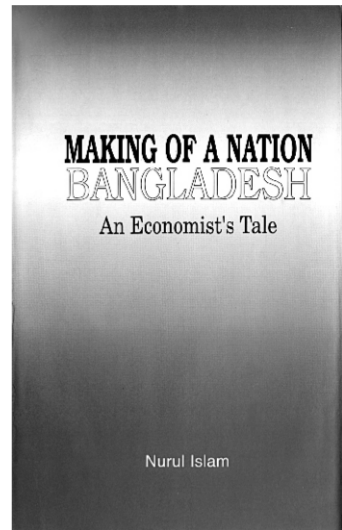
Book Review

Making of a Nation: Bangladesh - An Economist's Tale

By Nurul Islam

The University Press Limited, Dhaka.

xix +482 pages



Commissions (1961 and 1964), the East Pakistan economists panel on the Fourth Five Year Plan, in all of which the author was involved, and at individual and institutional levels. Disparity was measured and the flow of real resources from the eastern wing of the country to the west was quantified, often using relatively simple macroeconomic relationships, and argued about. The book well describes the work of Bengali economists in the field and their efforts to gain the establishment's acceptance of their arguments to eliminate disparities. Their goal was also to raise public awareness of the issues involved.

There is of course no suggestion that the economic destiny of the province lay in the hands of economists and Nurul Islam deflects himself from any such idea. In a major chapter of the book he elaborates the Awami League's Six-Points Programme, one of the most important landmarks in the political process that finally led to the emergence of Bangladesh. Although the fundamental objective of the Programme can be simply stated as one of preventing the west from exploiting the east, the institutional arrangements to achieve that objective were highly complex and were meant to end the west's established privileges. The west did not have the political will to accept such arrangements. The chapter makes an important contribution to the understanding of the Programme and the political battles that raged around it.

The author's story of exile after the military crackdown of 1971 is an interlude that is interesting to read but the tale of efforts at nation building begins soon. It is a long story. From a distance of almost three decades, the history of Bangladesh in the first three or four years of its existence has often seemed to me, and possibly to others who have lived through it, a view through the wrong end of a telescope: a huge diversity of events, actions and actors, as well as problems, promises and possibilities, all collapsed into a tiny length of time. This is true even when we restrict ourselves to economic history.

The problems of rebuilding and development were enormous. There was no well defined path to tread. In over half a dozen core chapters Nurul Islam treats many of the major events, as well as many of the issues that faced the new nation, and action

taken to tackle them. The dilemma over whether a programme of reconstruction and rehabilitation, rather than a plan for long-term development should not have priority; the setting up of the Planning Commission, headed by the author, and its functioning; the formulation of a Five Year Plan that was supposed to reflect the sociopolitical framework of the constitution; the extent of the political commitment to the Plan; the debilitating tension between the bureaucrats and the "Professors" of the Commission; Plan priorities; the question of nationalization of industries and banks; economic relationships with India, the country's big neighbour and ally in the liberation war; aid relationships with western donors, both multilateral and bilateral; the famine of 1974; and many more, crowd the pages of the book. They make compelling reading. The final chapters of the book go beyond history, bring in questions of economic policy reform, and offer important insights into issues of the relationship of Bangladesh with its big neighbour on the one hand and its (unequal) partners in development in the western world on the other.

There can certainly be differing interpretations of the historical scenes presented. Rashomon-esque perceptions of the same event are always possible. But to the present reviewer many of the events and issues described in the book and much of the analyses clearly ring a bell, or a series of it. Even where the descriptions tend to be tedious or contentious, they are useful. In the process of presentation of history, the author also debunks some of the popular misconceptions about some of the stances of the government of the time that have been kept alive over the years.

The author's sojourn through memory lane, made in a separate chapter, as well as tidbits served elsewhere, does enliven the tale and should tickle readers weary of details of weighty issues. The personal relationship between the author and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is described as being correct and based on mutual respect. There are interesting accounts, told for the first time, of the author's private encounters with his leader. More interesting should be the never-told-before snippets, for example, on the relationships between Sheikh Mujib and Mushtaque Ahmed, his nemesis. And how many people know that Tajuddin Ahmed, then Finance Minister, told Robert McNamara, the World Bank President, in no uncertain terms that what Bangladesh needed immediately was bullocks for tilling the land, and not fancy ideas from the Bank? We are grateful to the author for such insider stories. He sometimes leaves in the nook of anonymity some of the personalities whose actions he describes or comments on. This may be mildly infuriating to some; others may actually enjoy connecting the dots.

The book is some 500 pages long. There is an attempt at comprehensiveness, which is perhaps not always a virtue. It was achieved, in a number of places, by delving into areas quite unrelated to the main story. And sometimes it was necessary for the author to use what looked like weak pretexts to bring in a new discussion. The quote from Keynes on page 354 certainly looked so to me. But these are minor criticisms which do not diminish the great value of the book.

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Mass arrest under 'section 54 of CrPC' infringes on freedom to protest

A.H. JAFFOR ULLAH

In a democratic society people are given their inalienable rights to protest against tyranny, authoritarianism, and anti-democratic behaviour of the government. To squash dissension by the brutal misapplication of a law whose semantics is not clear is tantamount to misuse. That is what is exactly happening in Bangladesh over the last few days.

We are all appalled and horrified hearing the news that a record about 15,000 people were arrested all over Bangladesh by the police under the provision of section 54 of CrPC in just 2-3 days (April 22-24, 2004). The bulk of the arrests, over 12,000, just happened in and around Dhaka. It is a grim scenario that paints a very negative image of Bangladesh. It is far too clear that these arrests are politically motivated; the government is trying to squish the democratic rights of people by ushering in a scorched-earth policy, which Bangladesh people have not experienced since the repressive rule of Pakistani military man Gen. Yahya Khan during the independence movement in 1971.

Without going into details the circumstances under which the police has made the arrests, let us analyse the scope of the law under

which these gross abuses of civil rights are taking place. In order to foil a political movement that has gathered steam in recent months to oust the 'repressive government of Khaleda Zia', the government has invoked 'section 54 of CrPC.' This law, which is anti-democratic in nature, allows the police to arrest any person without obtaining an arrest warrant. The arrest under "section 54 of CrPC" can be made by a person belonging to the law-enforcement agency under the pretext of 'reasonable suspicion' that a person has committed, or is about to commit a crime. The phrase 'reasonable suspicion' is an indefinable term and as such the law should be declared unconstitutional.

The law enforcement agency members are not in a position to define the term 'reasonable suspicion.' Therefore, why should the society place undue burden on their shoulder? Bangladesh's police are notorious for taking bribe. The less we talk about it, the better for the image of the nation. But one thing is for sure; the police may become very proactive to enforce this ludicrous law just to fill their pocket. This scribe just read in the newspaper published from Dhaka on April 26, 2004, in which it was mentioned that police are making illegal money, a euphe-

mism for bribe taking, hand over fist to exploit the situation created by Khaleda Zia Administration. The publicity generated by this kind of news paints a very dismal picture for Bangladesh. The government being very myopic is strengthening the grips of a rotten police department whose esteem is at the nadir at this time.

This writer has never read in the past the news of such mass of people getting arrested under the pretext of a dubious law called 'section 54 of CrPC.' As I have alluded to, this law is anti-democratic. The scope of the law is poorly or ill defined at best. I request Bangladesh's law scholars to look into the legality of this repressive law. How may one define the term 'reasonable suspicion'? Should one carry a loaded AK-47 or a sharp knife? What if a person is unarmed? Should that too qualify as a person about to get involved in a criminal act? A law has to be defined very clearly. This wishy-washy definition of 'section 54 of CrPC' is not up to the snuff. Bangladesh citizens should precisely know what constitutes the term 'reasonable suspicion.' There should be strict guideline on what constitutes to be reasonably suspicion as far as a citizen is concerned.

Like any other civilized nation's citizens, Bangladeshi people have

this inalienable right to roam freely inside the nation. This falls into the category of personal freedom. But by profiling certain citizens such as young people who are critical of the regime as 'possible law-breaker' the police under the guidance from the ruling party are obstructing personal rights. That is the reason there is this doubt that the clause of 'reasonable suspicion' won't work to incarcerate citizens of the country. A mass arrest is a dreaded thing in any democratic society. Bangladesh is not certainly under a Gestapo rule. Why then impetuously the government has invoked 'section 54 of CrPC' at this time?

If Bangladesh wants to join a comity of nations, then she should follow the norm vis-à-vis acceptable behaviour of the law enforcement agency. In the West, a person is hardly stopped in the road while driving by the police to check his or her valid driving licence. Police may however stop a driver if he or she breaks a law. This is a norm. Similarly, young folks assembling in different parts of Dhaka or Chittagong should not be deemed as anti-social elements. If they break law only then should the police step in. Otherwise, the police by arresting hordes of young people under the pretext of 'section 54 of CrPC' are creating

chaos in the society.

The laws enacted in any nation are being done for the orderly functioning of a society. But Bangladesh seems to be an exception in this regard. The governments enacted this dubious law in the past to strengthen their repressive power. As far as democracy is concerned, it is a sure way to weaken the personal rights of ordinary citizens. Laws are enacted not to repress citizens but for smooth functioning of a society. The legality of 'section 54 of CrPC' should be challenged in the Supreme Court. All in all, it is an anti-democratic piece of legislation. A law should be well defined and not ambiguous. The phrase "reasonable suspicion" in 'section 54 of CrPC' makes it dubious and suspicious. That is why we see a gross miscarriage of justice in Bangladesh when we read that about 20,000 people were incarcerated because the inept and corrupt police are harassing people en masse thinking that some of them may join the movement to oust the present government under whom the Bangladesh society has become an 'unstable nation'. Make this repressive law illegal and save the very essence of democracy in Bangladesh.

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Fiddling while Bangladesh burns

NAEEM MOHAIEEM

ON January 8, the government caved in to religious extremists and banned "all books" of the Ahmadiyya Muslims. Faced with widespread condemnation, the government's weak excuse was that the step was taken to ensure "safety and security" in Bangladesh. Whose security was assured by this was not made clear - however, it is clear that the Ahmadiyya community's safety has worsened after the ban. Emboldened by the government decision, the International Khatme Nabuwat (Last Prophet Movement) has taken a series of escalating steps which may ultimately lead to national pogroms against the Ahmadiyyas. Meanwhile, the secular-liberal intelligentsia continues to respond in slow-motion, labouing under the illusion that polite statements will be effective against a rabid movement that uses violence, intimidation and street mobs to carry out their programmes.

Since January, a series of incidents have upped the ante in the campaign to declare Ahmadiyyas non-Muslim. In February, the environment of hate was amplified by the publication of the book "Why Qadianis are Not Muslims?" (Global Publishing) by Jamaat leader Delwar Hossain Sayeede. On March 5, Imam Salauddin of Ambarnagar village (Noakhali) issued a post-Jumma fatwa declaring Ahmadiyas non-Muslim and calling for a boycott of the community. The particular target of the fatwa was the family of retired high school principal Morshed Alam Chowdhury.

Since the declaration, local thugs surrounded the house and refused to allow anyone to leave the house. No relatives were allowed to visit the family. When a servant was sent from the house to shop in the local market, he was beaten and threatened with death if he continued to work for the family. Thugs cut down the trees on Chowdhury's property and stole fish from his pond. When asked about the fatwa, Imam Salauddin retorted he had done this in accordance with a fatwa signed by 117 Maulvis in June 2003.

A week later, a more violent programme was launched in Kakuka union (Barguna). The programme was announced at a two-day rally of the International Khatme Nabuwat. Inspired by the rally, zealots prepared to attack the 1,000 Ahmadiyyas who had been living in the areas for the last 50 years. The incident attracted coverage from national media including Bhorer Kagoj, Jonokontho and Prothom Alo. It was also reported in the Daily Star that Madrasa students were being organised with the intention of razing the Ahmadiyya neighbourhood which accommodated 100 Ahmadiyyas and their mosque. Spurred to action by the media presence, the district police administration intervened and prevented the takeover of the Ahmadiyya mosque. Although the police played a positive role in Barguna, a more chilling story emerged on April 6 from Shalkiri village (Ponchogorh). In that village, the leader of the local chapter of Khatme Nabuwat, Maulana Abdul Karim, arrived at Ahmadiyya houses in a police jeep and conducted searches for publications. When contacted by the media, Karim

admitted that no magistrate had accompanied them on the searches.

The progressive Bengali response to this escalating chain of events has been slow and reactive. This can be best highlighted by a personal experience. On April 15, the Dhaka premiere of our documentary "Muslims or Heretics?" was held at the Goethe Centre. Everyone was pleased by the standing-room only event, especially the presence of a large number of young faces. The documentary was followed by a spirited discussion and the repeated slogan, "We must do something!" Yet, newspaper reports on April 17 only highlighted how far behind we are in the battle to rescue Bangladesh from the extremists. Alongside dutiful reporting of the film screening, Prothom Alo carried a much larger headline, "Khatme Nabuwat rally, two books seized from Ahmadiyya mosque." While we had been politely sipping tea on the rooftop of Goethe Centre and discussing our plans, the zealots were ten steps ahead of us, launching a massive rally aimed at taking over the Nakhpalpara mosque.

This incident is direct evidence of how much the Khatme Nabuwat has been emboldened by the government ban. In November, when Nabuwat first attacked the Nakhpalpara mosque, police fought pitched battles with them and successfully defended the mosque. By contrast, on April 17, police escorted five members of Khatme Nabuwat into the Ahmadiyya mosque. Led by Nayebe Amir Nur Hossain Nurani, the Nabuwat leaders seized copies of the Quran and Bukhari Sharif. On Channel 1 evening news, a Nabuwat

leader was seen examining the books, while the police followed him obediently.

I stated before that progressive activists' response to the current crisis is too slow and hesitant. After the documentary screening, a film forum representative asked us about organising a screening in October. I stared at him in disbelief! October is six months away - did he really believe the zealots would be moving so slowly? At an April 6 press conference, Khatme Nabuwat leaders announced a programme to "liberate" Ahmadiyya mosques throughout the country, including Hobiganj, Narayanganj, Brahmanbaria, Ponchogorh and Munshiganj. According to their spokesperson, there were 91 Ahmadiyya mosques in Bangladesh, several of which had already been "liberated." Speaking at the press conference, one Nabuwat leader said, "Because we haven't been able to create enough pressure on the Prime Minister, we haven't been able to extract our main demand [of declaring them non-Muslim]. This time, we will fulfil our demands through an unstoppable movement." They also declared a new deadline of June 30 for the government to declare Ahmadiyyas non-Muslim. With ruthless efficiency, Khatme Nabuwat, which has a 33-member executive committee, is

rolling out sub-committees in upazilas and districts to implement these demands.

Given the speed at which the anti-Ahmadiyya movement is gathering momentum, progressives need to respond with a sense of crisis and urgency. Bangladesh is the land of "dofa" and "dabi", but we should have only one "dofa" - and that is the withdrawal of the ban on Ahmadiyya books. It is also essential that this be a non-partisan effort, otherwise the government will refuse to cooperate. Sensible members of the ruling coalition can be allies in this movement to protect religious freedom. Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) has filed a "Demand of Justice" notice with the government, asking for an explanation of the ban. Similar and stronger actions must follow quickly from a wide variety of organisations.

At the risk of repeating myself from an earlier article, I quote Safdar Hashmi - the Indian playwright who was beaten to death by government thugs in the 70s. "Halla Bol (Raise Hell)! And get results."

I will keep repeating myself until all of us wake up.

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