

Bangladesh: end of the old order

Simon Hardy Mon, 01/10/2007 - 17:00

Simon Hardy

In mid September, Bangladeshi garment workers in Dhaka organised a 10,000 strong demonstration, in open defiance of the emergency laws, demanding higher wages and improved conditions of work. Garments are Bangladesh's biggest single export earner, accounting for 75% of total export earnings last year. The company directly involved, the Nassa Group, produces for cheap clothing outlets like Wal-Mart in the US and Primark in the UK.

Nassa is reputedly one of Bangladesh's better employers, among the first to pay its 27,000 workers the national minimum wage of \$25 (£13) a month, a figure agreed last year after a series of militant struggles.

The marches were eventually broken up by the army and police, actions that are increasingly politicising the economic struggles of the workers.

This comes on top of a veritable explosion of militant demonstrations across the country in late August against the military regime, sparked off by the students demonstrating and demanding an increase in democratic rights. The army provocatively occupied the universities, invading the academic and social life of the campuses, aware that the students had brought down two previous military governments.

Within days, massive protests had spread to at least six major towns and cities, involving workers and unemployed in the demonstrations. The military responded with bullets and tear gas, killing one protestor and injuring several others. A curfew was imposed, and several academics and student leaders were arrested, reports stated that they were subsequently tortured in prison. Prime Minister Ahmed referred to them as 'evil forces' working to destabilise the country.

The scale and scope of the protests, however, shocked the military establishment, causing them to cave in to most of the demands of the students, including evacuating the universities and campuses. However, the state of emergency remains and as long as the army rules the streets the situation remains explosive.

The struggle for democratic rights, well to the fore in Bangladesh, is nevertheless intimately linked with that against economic hardship. The rapid growth in the cost of living, food prices and other essential goods have more than doubled in price in the last 6 months, has given rise to urgent economic demands from the workers and poor for higher wages, voiced by trade unions and co-operatives. This is leading to a class wide confrontation with the real forces of evil, the Generals and puppet politicians backed by the World Bank.

Since January 2007, Bangladesh has suffered under what is, in effect, a military dictatorship. The elections that were due at the beginning of the year were postponed indefinitely; an interim government (made up of technocrats and military backed politicians) said that this step was taken because of the endemic corruption that had to be rooted out before returning to elections. On September 5, the President, Iajuddin Ahmed, announced that he would also stay on indefinitely because there is no legitimate government to

elect him.

The current political crisis is a manifestation of Bangladesh's deeper problems. When India was torn apart by the British ruling class after the fall of their colonial empire, the area in the east of Bengal around the Ganges delta, was marked off as East Pakistan, separated by 1,600 kilometres from West Pakistan united only by a common religion, Islam.

The imperialists thereby cut the Bengali-speaking people in two, the west Bengalis were largely Hindu, so they stayed in India. A united economy, a powerful working class movement and a developed national culture were severed. Despite constituting a majority in the new state, the Bengalis were treated as second class citizens in the new nation, expected to learn Urdu, submit to politicians from the west and so on.

The birth of Bangladesh

Thus, it was scarcely surprising these differences ignited a struggle for national liberation against Pakistan. The success of the struggle led to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, written off almost immediately by Henry Kissinger as a 'basket case', a country so small and economically unviable that it would be unable to sustain itself in any traditional bourgeois sense. The pressure of the world market, crippling foreign debts, exploitation by foreign multinationals and so-called natural disasters have ensured that Bangladesh has lurched from crisis to crisis.

The failure of capitalism to create an economic base in the country to provide for the 150 million people living there is reflected in the figures, 75% live on less than \$2 a day. The most important sector by far is agriculture, in which the great majority of the population is employed. However, the bankruptcy of the system means that the issue of who owns or profits from the land, which is such an important part of most people's lives, is left unresolved.

Over a third of the peasant population are classified as landless, over three quarters of the country rely on the land and fishing to survive and subsistence farming is the primary mode of existence for 85 per cent of the country's poor. Yet, under the impact of globalisation and climate change, the situation is now getting even worse for many Bangladeshi's who still live at the mercy of the seasons. Around a third of the country floods every year in the summer monsoon seasons. In 2007, the flooding was particularly bad, with around 80% of the country under water at one point.

Bangladesh has suffered from its birth with ineffective and unstable bourgeois democracy, wracked by endemic corruption, that has resulted in several assassinations of presidents and repeated military coups. Two main political parties developed, the Bangladesh National Party and the Awami League. Generally speaking, the first appealed to the army, capitalist class and middle classes, whilst the Awami League attempted to appeal to the peasants and urban poor, However, both of them were pro-capitalist parties separated only by a formal identification with opposing ideologies (nationalism or 'socialism?'). In government, both parties pursued and implemented much the same measures and policies that were demanded by the international bourgeoisie, and both have resorted to violent hooligan methods to attack and break up the other side's political activities.

The polarisation of Bangladeshi politics grew and deepened after the failure to establish a dominant national ideological trend, called 'Mujibism?', after the first president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a mixture of reformist socialism, Islam and liberalism. His assassination by the army marked the military's first foray onto the political scene, and it is a general methodology they have maintained, mirroring their counterparts in Pakistan's military circles. Bangladesh laboured under a 15-year military dictatorship from the late 1970's.

Bangladesh politics sees the frequent mobilisation of gangs of unemployed young men to beat up and intimidate political opponents, combined with attacks on the press and intellectuals critical of the government, and persecution of the minority Hindu population.

The Middle classes

The development of a layer of well paid workers, a labour aristocracy, or a better off middle class did not occur to the extent it did even in neighbouring India.

Thus, a reformist labour movement never put down strong roots or acted as a counterweight to the bourgeois parties. Instead, Bangladesh has suffered a growth of NGO's and other 'civil society' institutions that rely on western money and help to institutionalise dependence of wide sections of the population on western charities. Around 10% of the GDP of the country is from western aid and loans. This NGO-isation itself acts as blockage to the development of a mass political workers' movement.

Furthermore, the strength of dynastic tendencies in the two main parties meant that both revolved around the personality and politics of two men and, after their assassinations, the wife of the founder of the BNP, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Rahman. These two historical leaders of Bangladesh have alternated in power since the early 90's.

These were the factors that led to the military coup and the drive by sections of the Bangladesh ruling elite, backed by the World Bank and other imperialist institutions, to transform the Bangladesh political system into one more attuned to neoliberalism.

Fakhruddin Ahmed, prime minister of the caretaker government, was a chief executive for a Bangladesh bank and a bureaucrat within the World Bank, a man after the imperialists' own hearts. Since being invited to take power, he has pursued a 'tough' anti-graft policy which has resulted in over two hundred arrests of senior Bangladeshi politicians and civil servants. Since the summer, he has also targeted the two first women of the nation, Zia and Hasina, who have been investigated under corruption charges. Hasina was also placed under arrest for the more serious charge of ordering the murder of four political opponents in October 2006.

The arrest of Begum Zia led to an internal row in the BNP. The party split into reformists (those opposed to the Zia regime and willing to hang their old leaders out to dry to win some backing from the current authorities) and the loyalists, who stuck with their persecuted leaders. The Awami League was wracked by a similar internal conflict, but Hasina out-manoeuvred the reformists by herself setting up a committee to establish constitutional reform within the party.

Why is this happening now? One of the primary factors is the international 'war on terror'. As a majority Islamic country, the US and its allies have a vested interest in preventing it descending into chaos and providing a breeding ground for 'terrorists'. For them, this means creating a more stable parliamentary structure that they believe will stop 'Talibanisation' of the country, that is the growth of militant Islamist organisations such as Jamaat-e-Islami.

Hence, the interim government serves two purposes, cleaning out the Augean stables of Bangladesh politics whilst holding the country in a vice like grip of near martial law to frustrate the growth of what they see as extremist elements. The class nature of the military take over is further exposed by the banning of all trade union activity in the country (meetings, rallies, strikes and so on).

Re-alignment

The political process underway in Bangladesh is, therefore, one of political realignment and restructuring of

the previous parties and institutions under the watchful eye of the Bangladeshi army and the imperialists. As this process gets underway, the government has promised to repeal some of the emergency laws in order to facilitate the process. For instance, within one week of the BNP split being made public, the government met with party leaders to discuss relaxing the ban on political activity in the country. It would be hard for the BNP reformists to organise themselves into a more amenable political party under the official patronage of the interim government if they cannot organise political meetings. One of the new political formations will no doubt be picked and groomed for a role as the future party of power.

If the imperialists want to liquidate the old political order and rebuild Bangladeshi politics, then the working class must be clear about what its goals are during the process of transition. The capitalists will attempt to build new populist parties that appeal to both the rich and the poor as offering a way out of the crisis.

New political leaders, like Mohammed Yunus, may be brought to the fore to establish new 'clean' political parties to break apart the old two party system. Yunus won a Nobel peace prize for his idea of micro credits that claims to have 'revolutionised' poverty alleviation in the third world. These loans, that go to some of the poorest people in the world, mainly women, are intended to foster small-scale, family-based, 'micro-businesses' and, in time, to develop a more conservative layer in rural society. To the extent that they are successful, they will divide the peasants in every village. If this is the kind of pioneering system that capitalism has in store for the millions of poor in Bangladesh then every worker, youth and peasant should be worried.

Revolutionary communists in Bangladesh have great opportunities in conditions where workers are coming into struggle, where militant trade unions and peasant organisations are springing up, or will do so tomorrow. They will need to avoid all sectarianism when it comes to uniting mass forces and, at the same time, base themselves on a programme of class independence and the goal of working class power.

Programme

The immediate economic, as well as the democratic, needs of the masses can be focussed around the call for a revolutionary constituent assembly, not the charade of military and imperialist-vetted elections. A sovereign constituent assembly could resolve crucial issues like the land question, nationalise the industries and infrastructure under workers' control and replace the standing army and its coup-making high command with a mass workers' and peasants' militia.

The working class and rural poor must urgently use the present upheavals to begin to build a new revolutionary party for themselves, not a party that is divided by religion or patronage to this or that rich leader, but a party that fights for socialism and the removal of Bangladesh from the world imperialist system as the only step that will be able to lift the millions out of poverty, a workers' state helping to spread the revolution and create a United Socialist States of South Asia. Only along the road of struggle for this can the urgent needs of the masses in Bangladesh, economic, social, political and environmental, be met.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/bangladesh-end-old-order>