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Party over State

Willem van Schendel

Many Bangladeshis expected the postwar recovery to be quick. Now that West Pakistani economic exploitation had ceased, a very popular government had come to power, and the world was extending aid to the new country, things were rapidly going to get better. These expectations soon proved to have been too optimistic.

After the war the institutions of state were weak and in disarray. Many senior positions in the bureaucracy and armed forces lay vacant because their occupants had been from West Pakistan. These institutions as well as the political parties now became arenas of factional struggle between those who had actively supported independence from exile in India and those who had tried to weather the storm of 1971 inside Bangladesh. The weak new state was confronted with enormous challenges: it needed to disarm groups of freedom fighters and establish law and order, run the newly nationalised industries, restore the infrastructure and become a player in the international state system. Most importantly, the state had to deliver economic development. The promise of emancipation from political domination by Pakistan had been fulfilled; now the government would be judged on its performance regarding its other promise: to emancipate the delta from economic exploitation, poverty and stagnation.

In a feeble state confronted with high popular expectations, the role of a charismatic leader is crucial. [Sheikh] Mujib relied on his personal popularity and political intuition to tackle the new challenges. It was an almost impossible balancing act and it soon became clear that he had been far more effective as an opposition leader than he was as a statesman—fiery rhetoric was more his style than forceful governance. He was unable to transform his personal relationship with his followers into an established authority structure independent of his personal qualifications. In an eerie replay of the late 1940s and early 1950s—when the Muslim League had been unable to switch from being the engine of the movement for Pakistan to being an effective ruling party—the early 1970s saw a steep erosion of the popularity of

the Awami League. Among the reasons were a blossoming personality cult (which reminded people of the Ayub era), the attempt to dub the state ideology "Mujibism" (*mujibbād*), charges of undue Indian influence in Bangladesh, and reports of widespread corruption and nepotism in the party. But these were not the main reason: the government squandered its popularity chiefly because it was seen to contribute to a deep malaise in the economy.

After the war many Bangladeshis, expecting a rapid recovery of the economy, were shocked to see that the living standard of the majority of the population did not improve. On the contrary, it kept on falling. Economic productivity lagged far behind the pre-war level and by 1973 agricultural and industrial production had declined to 84 and 66 per cent respectively of what they had been just before the war. The real income of agricultural and industrial labourers went down drastically. For example, the cost of living for agricultural labourers increased by 150 per cent as overall real incomes slumped to 87 per cent of what they had been in 1970.

What was going on? Partly, it was a matter of inexperience. Many top positions in the state were now occupied by politicians and bureaucrats who had been suddenly promoted from the middle ranks of a provincial government to the highest rank of a national one; they needed time to learn their jobs. Another factor was that most members of the power elite assumed that the removal of Pakistani exploitation by itself would lead to an economic resurgence, and hence they paid more attention to political, legal and diplomatic matters than to economic ones. Third, the economic circumstances had changed enormously. Gone were Pakistan's "twenty-two families" [who had dominated the national economy] and their allies, the landlords and armed forces. Instead, economic power was now in the hands of the delta's surplus farmers, small-scale entrepreneurs and industrial trade unions. Each expected that its support for the Awami League would translate into greatly expanded economic opportunities.

These dynamics exacerbated the economic muddle and prevented the new regime from developing a social agenda. Further problems arose from its failure to create a professional, politically neutral state bureaucracy that could have implemented its policies effectively. Instead, it engaged in an abundant politics of patronage that continues to plague the Bangladesh state machinery today. In independent Bangladesh, ruling-party loyalty supersedes state interest. Rulers use the state to further their party rather than the other way around.

The Awami League was plagued by internal rivalries and sought to secure its members' commitment by creating networks of patronage that colonised the state. It appointed party loyalists, often irrespective of their

administrative competence, to key positions in the state bureaucracy. This dominance of party-political considerations forestalled any coherent economic policy, let alone its implementation. Awami League ideologues could not reach a consensus over the correct national and socialist development policies and, worse, despite high-minded rhetoric and much suffering during the Pakistan period and the liberation war, the Awami League "had not imbued its leaders or members with idealism to work selflessly for the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country."¹

Awami League rule soon turned out to be a case of party over nation. Management of the nationalised enterprises was handed to inexperienced political activists, leading to a sharp drop in production and a sharp rise in managerial wealth. Similarly, import licences, distributed among Awami League protégés, became a rich source of illegal pickings, partly by means of smuggling imported goods, jute and rice to India. Thugs with connections in the Awami League became notorious for extortion and Awami League leaders used a new paramilitary force—the Rokkhi Bahini (National Security Force)—to spread fear through intimidation and torture. Mujib was aware of the "blatant abuse of power and corrupt practices of his party people"² but, always the party loyalist, did nothing to stop them.

Notes

1. Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath* (Dacca: Bangladesh Books International, 1980), 159.
2. S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2005), 289.