

# **Battle in Bangladesh for Ballot and Against Terror**

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It is incredible, the way the world's sole superpower can dictate election issues everywhere. Post-9/11, "terrorism" has become a major if not the most important political issue, not only in the US but in several countries, including in South Asia. Bangladesh provides an immediate instance.

Terrorism threatens to emerge as the single biggest political issue in India, with the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) out to make it so, following the string of bomb blasts in Kashmir, Mumbai and elsewhere. If and when General Pervez Musharraf decides at long last on a date for the promised general election in Pakistan, terrorism will without doubt dominate the issues on the agenda. And terrorism will be more than a mere talking point in the little over two months ahead to the big battle of ballots in Bangladesh.

Terrorism, of course, is not really the main issue in any of these countries. The crusading "anti-terrorist" doesn't like to be told that the root-causes of terrorism are the real issue, but that does not make it any less true. In all these three cases, poverty is the most palpable of the root-causes. It is compounded, in all the three, by religious communalism with its vicious message and violent methods. The combination pits each of the countries against neighbors and thus represents a formidable counter to peace in the region.

In the case of Bangladesh, one of the real issues found recent illustration in the award of the Nobel Prize for Peace to Bangladeshi economist Mohammed Yunus for his innovative scheme of "Grameen (rural)" banking. The micro-credit scheme, which may be debatable on points of economic detail, has certainly helped and even empowered the impoverished Bangladeshi

women. The scheme has succeeded, notably, despite fierce opposition from Islamic "fundamentalists."

Still, the self-appointed defenders of democracy worldwide have declared "terrorism" as the main issue in the coming elections. Even while claiming a policy of non-intervention in the country's internal affairs, the George Bush administration has made its preference clear. Said US State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack: "We certainly stand with any government that is in a fight against terrorism. It is a serious issue. I know it is a serious issue for the Bangladesh government."

More serious, immediately, is the prospect of political violence increasing from now to the as yet unannounced date of the election in January 2007. The run-up to the election, in fact, began with several rounds of violence in the streets of Dhaka (formally Dacca) and elsewhere. The cadres of the main contending parties, the ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL), clashed as the country struggled with the very first step toward a constitutional election.

At least 18 lay dead in the streets before a compromise solution on a caretaker government before the election could be found. Under the country's constitution, such a caretaker government under an impartial head had to be formed and given 90 days to organize the election. Former chief justice K.M. Hasan formally met the criteria and was the first choice of the BNP under outgoing prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia. The AL and Hasina Wajed were prompt to protest, pointing out that Hasan had long ago been a BNP luminary.

The AL objected to a caretaker regime under President Iajuddin Ahmed, criticizing him as "too close" to Begum Zia. Hasina Wajed, however, has now asked Ahmed to "prove his neutrality" by taking steps including "action against corrupt BNP ministers." Despite the strong language, this is seen as an indication of implicit acceptance of the president for the post.

The street fighting, however, is not going to stop. The next three months are likely, by most accounts, to witness terrorist activity as much

as political rallies and campaigns. There is a clear danger that the BNP's election campaign will have a place for such threatening activities.

Begum Zia's five-year term in office has been possible only with the help of Jamat-e-Islami (JeI), which wielded a clout out of all proportion to its meager strength in the Bangladesh parliament. The JeI's status as a ruling party lent a sort of legitimacy to non-parliamentary Harkut-ul Al Jehadi.

What deserves note, however, is that the Bangladeshi fundamentalism was a bequest of the Bush wars and, before that, of the US involvement in Afghanistan, in those days when the Taliban were no "terrorists" but "freedom fighters" and "crusaders against Communism." The first Bangladeshi jihadis were returnees from Afghanistan, and their cause received considerable fillip with the eruption of the Iraq war.

At the last unofficial count, Bangladesh harbored no less than 48 jihadi camps, all of them in areas where insurgent movements from neighboring countries (including India) found refuge.

The Indian peace movement has particular reason for concern over the role of terrorists in the run-up. This will, sadly but surely, provide fresh ammunition to the Indian far right, which has been shrilling away about the allegedly dire threat to the country from Bangladesh and the danger of a "demographic invasion" designed to make the Muslims a more populous community at least in some states of India.

It is the Indian far right's agitprop that is making thoughtful Bangladeshis worry about terrorism promoted by not only fundamentalists but also "foreign agencies." The added concern has not been allayed by frequent reports of fire exchanged between Indian and Bangladeshi forces on the border.

The run-up to the Bangladesh election and its outcome will be of intense interest to all South Asians, who recognize their common stakes in resisting and routing forces of fundamentalism and fascism.

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**P.S.**

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