

The West and the Challenge of Democracy in Bangladesh- a Canadian Perspective

South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF)

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Your Excellency, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to join you all tonight on this important and timely topic. I congratulate the European Parliament on the resolution it passed last week (Nov 21) on human rights and the forthcoming elections in Bangladesh, which is accessible online at:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=P7-RC-2013-0497&language=EN>

Both the preamble and 15-point resolution should strike anyone who cares for the Bangladeshi people and country as sound and constructive at a critical point in an important nation's history. All democrats across the world can enthusiastically support both the letter and spirit of the resolution.

Canadian MPs' Report

Last night, I had an opportunity to read the report of two respected Canadian Members of Parliament, Russ Hiebert and Joe Daniels, following their pre-election visit to Bangladesh with Antonio Vieira da Cruz of SADF's Ottawa office. They met with a broad cross-section of religious leaders, journalists, lawyers, academics, former government and military officials, and representatives of civil society organizations. They heard differing perspectives on the role of the Anti-Corruption Commission, the International War Crimes Tribunal, the Awami League (AL), Bangladesh National Party (BNP), Jamaat-e-Islami, and other political parties on Bangladeshi hopes generally for a stable political future.

Their report is self-explanatory and I'd recommend that everyone interested in Bangladesh as one of the world's largest democracies (with a population of more than 150 million) read it (available on line at www.sadf.eu), especially the conclusions /recommendations.

Three of its points which caught my attention:

- The mission was struck by the high level of optimism among the people despite the current serious political unrest. The economy has grown at an average of 6% in real terms for the past decade, in large measure due to the \$21 billion ready-made garment sector and an industrious and entrepreneurial people.
- Both the government and opposition must help achieve political maturity. The government should appoint a caretaker government to oversee the election required by January 24, 2014 and should no longer require government permission before the Anti-Corruption Commission can launch investigations.
- The BNP should reflect on the role the extremist Jamaat is playing within it. It should also curtail the violence that often accompanies hartals, with the threat they pose to the lives and property of citizens.

Earlier Visit to Bangladesh

Permit me to mention here that I visited Bangladesh on behalf of the Chretien government during the 2002-03 periods. Among many recollections are these:

- The ready-made garment sector was vitally important to the economy then too. I watched thousands of mostly women going to work in Dhaka factories. Little did I anticipate then the fire and other tragedies in the plants that would later occur with great loss of life, most notably the Rana Plaza factory collapse. Nor did I voice then, as I do to you now, that if we consumers abroad would pay a little more for our clothes, safety could be improved and conscientious and hard-working families could live better. Recently, a BBC world service news program indicated that workers in one large plant were locked in it for 18 hours.
- In 2002-2003, Bangladesh was receiving a very large part of Canada's official development assistance (ODA)--thirty per cent sticks in my mind--and some of the projects in a village I visited by a non-government organization, Rural Development Associates, appeared to be achieving excellent results in terms of human development and the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG).
- The visit was partly a trade mission and one of our members was an executive of Niko Resources in Calgary, who was seeking a contract from the Bangladeshi government of the day to drill for natural gas under a lake. The company got the contract, but later pleaded guilty to bribery in connection with it and was fined \$9 million 2-3 years ago in a Canadian court. As an Alberta Member of Parliament and former prosecutor in the province, you can appreciate how badly I felt about what had occurred at the expense of both Bangladeshis and Canadians.

Advances of Women

Last Saturday in Stockholm, as part of its annual human rights days, I took the opportunity to attend a packed session on the situation of Bangladeshi women in Culture House. The speaker, Kushi Kabir, has been researching in the country since 1972. Among her points of relevance here tonight:

- Religious fundamentalism is having negative effects on women. Some parties are using religion to win votes; the increased communal violence appears to be causally related to the upcoming election. There is accordingly a shrinking democratic space for now in the country.
- In the first national election of 1973, there were virtually no women candidates, but by 2008 about a fifth of the MPs were women. The Prime Minister, Speaker, Leader of the Opposition, and several ministers today are women. Also her Excellency with us tonight.
- Approximately six million persons—80 per cent women--today work in the ready-made garment industry. Bangladesh is still one of the lowest wage countries; thirty cents more per shirt would allow workers to live decently. The country ranks 111 out of 186 on the UN human development index.
- Positive gains have been made despite patriarchal values. For example, the literacy rate, especially female literacy, has increased substantially. The country has performed well in fulfilling many of the MDG goals. Infant mortality and inoculations are not only accessible but have reached acceptable levels.

Secular tradition

Secularism was one of four principles enshrined in the original 1972 constitution of Bangladesh. It was removed in 1978 by the military ruler, General Ziaur Rahman, who

declared Islam the state religion. The Supreme Court restored secularism in 2010 as a basic constitutional tenet.

The removal secularism from the constitution for about three decades was described by many of the country's leaders as a betrayal of mainstream Bengali culture and society. Both are pluralist and progressive. The army, with its close association with conservative political parties, led by the Nationalist party (BNP), insists that Bangladesh must be officially a one religion country despite the longtime diversity of faiths.

In 2008, the newly-elected (by a landslide) Awami League (AL) government announced that it would re-introduce the original four principles into the preamble of the Constitution. Bangladesh's foreign minister (until three days ago when an interim government was formed for the election now declared to be held on Jan. 5th), Dipu Moni, declared that her country is "a secular, not moderate Muslim, country". The AL also appears to respect all religions. Virtually all Bangladeshis say religion is important in their daily lives, but many appear comfortable with the absence of one religion's dominance over their government.

South Asian countries differ on the secularism issue from some in the West, which assert complete separation of church and state. Secularism in South Asia appears to mean the freedom for all to practise their faiths without being subject to any discrimination or official persecution.

Ancient rulers, especially the Pala Empire and Nawabs, were secular in this sense in making decisions. Hindu and Muslim leaders had prominent persons from every faith community assisting them. The British East India Company, arriving in the 18th century, instituted separate laws for Hindus, Muslims and Christians, laying the foundation for a civil code which remains largely unaltered to date.

Unfortunately, the British Raj also worsened relations between two Bengali groups. Hindus were accepted into the civil service, but Muslims were not-at least on an equitable participation basis. This led to several movements across East Bengal (today's Bangladesh) aimed at resisting both the British Raj and Hindus. In 1905, a division of Bengal on communal lines was proposed for the Muslim majority in East Bengal. The British accepted partition, but it was annulled in 1911 due to opposition from those demanding a unified Bengal.

In 1947, Bengal was partitioned, with most of East Bengal joining Pakistan, and West Bengal becoming part of India. Subsequent tragic events compelled many Hindus to migrate to India after the 1950 and 1964 East Bengal genocides. With the establishment of Pakistan, Bengalis faced much discrimination. The subsequent liberation war saw Bengalis, regardless of religious affiliation, fight together as brothers and sisters for freedom.

Rahman, later taking over as president, unfortunately began using religion for partisan political purposes. He also created the BNP to further his goals. In 1988, the country's second military ruler, Hussain Ershad, declared Islam the state religion. Supporters of the BNP and the military also engaged in various anti-minority activities against Hindu and tribal communities.

Since the return to democracy in 1991, there have been growing calls by civil society members to return "secularism" to the constitution. The A.L. government and freedom fighters, as well as representatives from younger generations, announced in 2009 that the constitution would be amended to reintroduce the original four principles. The fifth

amendment of the constitution, removing secularism and replacing it with an Islamic declaration, was declared illegal by the High Court of Bangladesh in 2005. In 2010, the Supreme Court upheld this earlier ruling.

In 2013, a fundamentalist group, Hefajat-e-Islam, launched protests to achieve their demands. Among 13 points, it sought a stronger presence of Islam in the political system, including the cancellation of the Women's Development Policy (2009) and the secular education policy of the AL government. The ensuing campaign caused many tragic deaths.

Islam and Governance

Islam was introduced to what is now Bangladesh in the 8th century, mainly by Arab and Persian missionaries and merchants and conquest. Between the 8th and 12th century, a Buddhist dynasty known as the Pala Empire ruled Bengal. During this period, a majority of the Bengali population were Buddhists. Later, the Sena dynasty came to power, with conversion to Islam beginning in the 13th century.

Bangladesh is today predominantly a Sunni country, with many influenced by moderate Sufism. The Muslim population is approximately 88 per cent of the population. Religion has always been a strong part of the national identity, but varied at different time periods. The UN has recognized it as a “moderate Muslim and democratic country”.

A modified Anglo-Indian civil and criminal legal system operates throughout Bangladesh; there are no official sharia courts. Most Muslim marriages are presided over by a traditional Muslim judge whose advice is also sought on matters, such as inheritance and divorce. In the 1980s, Muslim clerics in Bangladesh still saw their function as teaching and preserving the Islamic way of life. Some, however, favoured the establishment of an Islamic theocracy in Bangladesh and were involved in several political parties.

Current Political Issue

The Supreme Court ruled in late summer this year that the country's largest Islamist party, the Jamaat, will not be allowed to compete in the upcoming parliamentary elections because of language in its' charter. The court rationale in essence was that as the charter refers to God as the highest legal power, it does not acknowledge the political sovereignty of the people of Bangladesh and is therefore unconstitutional. For context, it should be said that Islamists in Bangladesh largely opposed independence and favored remaining part of Pakistan. A leader of the Jamaat party, moreover, was quite recently sentenced to life in prison for war crimes during Bangladesh's independence war with Pakistan.

Avoiding Fundamentalism Violence

Finally, a few thoughts on the mid-November (2013) paper by SADF's Research Director, Dr. Siegfried Wolf: “Bangladesh: Drifting into Fundamentalism”. Many of the points he makes seem important for the people of Bangladesh and all friendly governments to keep in mind, including these ones:

- Security analysts should stop focusing on Afghanistan and Pakistan ('AFPak') alone and should study fanaticism in other South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh. The Taliban in Pakistan, notes Wolf, “are only a facet of ...an interconnected Islamist movement sector, pushed by transnational religious extremist organizations, like...al-Qaida(which) is dramatically rising in South Asia...the major goal is to establish Islamic fundamentalist state(s)-not only in Afghanistan but also in the Maldives, Pakistan and Bangladesh.. However, in order for the US to ensure a

safe withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington will remain ignorant towards this threat.”

- “...by using the strategy of general ignorance, the international community does not have to justify their reluctance to tackle this problem...(They) should be aware that the chosen tactic not only leads to the neglect of everything Bangladesh stands for, especially the idea of secular democracy...but also threatens to put the country back to square one...Bangladeshis would be controlled by jihadist organizations which emerged in or are supported by Pakistan”.
- In order to stop (the drift into an Islamic fundamentalist state), “a collective national involvement of the major political actors is necessary to protect democracy, secularism and human rights, supported by a more determined and active international community. As long as this is not achieved, Bangladesh risks falling in the clutches of Islamic fundamentalism.”

Conclusion

The *Economist* magazine reminds readers this week that about 1.6 billion residents of seven nations in South Asia live in civilian-led democracies. It probably strikes many in this room and around the world that only the spreading of democratic institutions is likely to offer a way out of the global conflict between modernity and those who feel aggrieved by it. Benjamin Barber, the American political scientist, posits McWorld as the universe of modernism and Jihad as that of fundamentalism in various forms. He states the essence of his book, *McWorld vs. Jihad*, thus:

“By extending the compass of democracy...civic globalization can open up opportunities for accountability, participation, [good] governance to those wishing to join the modern world...; by securing cultural diversity, a place for worship and faith... it can address the anxieties of those who fear secularist materialism and are fiercely committed to preserving their cultural and religious distinctiveness. The outcome of the cruel battle between Jihad and McWorld will depend on the capacity of the moderns to make the world safer for men and women in search of both justice and faith and can be one if democracy is the victor.”

I hope that most of us can agree both in Bangladesh and here tonight to support initiatives which encourage a host of civic and democratic NGOs across Bangladesh to combat, not terrorism per se, but the social inequalities that terrorists exploit so effectively. Our democracy banners should be Distributional and Global Justice, not retributive justice, and Religious Pluralism, not militant secularism.

In short, we democrats must constantly think of the Bangladeshi people who still live in abject poverty. This means, for example, that we favour more effective policies on education, health care, public safety and justice issues, transportation, defense and social justice. One of our key goals is that children, women and men around the world will all be able to live better lives and will cease killing themselves in order to murder others.

There is a vital relationship between economic development and democracy in terms of human development. Sustainable prosperity and human dignity occur when there is freedom to work gainfully, to choose governments by universal suffrage, to worship, to speak, to write, to relocate, to practise a profession, and with the right to independent judges under a system providing the rule of law for all. Thank you.