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Nationalism, socialism, democracy, secularism: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his founding principles of a Free and Secular Bangladesh

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DRAFT – 17 March 2020

On 17 March 2020, Bangladesh celebrated the 100th birthday of the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Bangabandhu, i.e. the Friend of Bengal.¹ He fought for the realisation of a state for the Muslims in India, Pakistan, later for autonomy and finally for independence for the land of the Bengalis. He spent the time of the Liberation War in a prison in Pakistan and became its first president and prime minister. Three and a half years later he was murdered in a coup d'état. Today his daughter, Sheikh Hasina, is Prime Minister of Bangladesh.²

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was led by four principles: nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism. Given his centenary, I thought it appropriate to have a look at the difficult genesis of his country in the light of these founding principles. All of them are still of utmost importance. All have been given different meanings and created controversy and discussion:

- Pakistan nationalism was hijacked by the outright chauvinism of a ruling class of politicians, bureaucrats, the business community and most of all the army from just one ‘wing’ of the country.
- Attempts at socialism ended in 1975. Bangladesh still is a People’s Republic and socialism is still enshrined in the constitution. But state enterprises have been dismantled, subsidies withdrawn and trade liberalized. Bangladesh socialism resembles now more social democracy³ or a mixed economic order with private ownership, competition and government regulation.
- The Pakistan army’s broken promise of democracy led to the Liberation war; the Bangladesh army’s coup d'état brought 15 years of military rule; democracy returned in 1990;
- Secularism became an early victim, when the ruling class started mobilising communal and sectarian sentiments. It was dispensed in Bangladesh, reinstated and is again under threat.

The Liberation war is now half a century ago, but despite all economic success, the collective trauma looms large over the Bangladeshi. Terrorist acts cause concern that the fundamental principles of the constitution are again in danger.

¹ He was invested with the title after his release from jail 1969 at a mammoth rally in the Dhaka Race Court, convened by the Chattro Sangram Parishad, by Tofail Ahmed, its onvener. Cf. Rehman Sobhan: Untranquil recollections. The years of fulfilment. New Delhi: Sage. 2016, p. 283.

² See: Wolfgang-Peter Zingel: On the political economy of violence in South Asia. Talk delivered at the International Conference on ‘Bangladesh and South Asia: Security Challenges and Threats from Violent Extremism and the Role of Government and Civil Society’ at the European Press Club in Brussels on 3 October 2019. <https://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/abt/intwep/zingel/Violence-Brussels2019-03.pdf> – For Mujibs early life see his ‘Unfinished memoirs’. Delhi: Penguin. 2012.

³ Tobias Gombert et al.: Foundations of social democracy. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. 2009. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/07077.pdf> (5.3.2020)

There is a common pattern in such atrocities:

(I) First, the Liberation war started with violent actions of government troops against their own people. As usually, thereafter any wrongdoing has been denied, so we have widely differing narratives. There is the tendency to forget on the side of the perpetrators while the victims' demand for recognition and compensation is ignored.⁴

(ii) Second, hopes of any kind of international justice have been frustrated, international players followed their own interests.

(iii) Third, violence has many reasons; those cited by the perpetrators tend to be constructed *post factum*. This applies especially to religion, ethnicity and language. They are instrumentalized and made part of the programme of populist parties or by seeking the support of single-issue (e.g. religious and ethnic) parties.

(iv) Fourth, to overcome such dangers, political programmes must not be divisive.

(v) Fifth, there is always the danger that victims turn into perpetrators (and the other way round), weakening their legal and even more their moral position.

Accordingly, there are many reasons, why we need secular governments. 'Secular' comes from Latin *saeculum*, and originally means a long span of time, later it described 'separate from religion'. The term has its roots in the European Enlightenment and cannot easily be translated. Accordingly, its meaning differs from country to country. The German Basic Law⁵ for example says that 'Civil and political rights and duties shall be neither dependent upon nor restricted by the exercise of religious freedom'⁶ or 'There shall not be a state church'⁷. Secularism is about non-interference of the state in religious affairs and vice versa. It has nothing to do with being religious or not.

Bangladesh was founded as and still is a 'People's Republic'. The constitution of 1972 said: 'Pledging that the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism [...] shall be the fundamental principles of the Constitution. [para] Further pledging that it shall be a fundamental aim of the State to realise through the democratic process a socialist society.' In 1977 President Zia ur Rahman removed article 12 on 'secularism' from the constitution (5th amendment).⁸ In 1988 article 2A was inserted by Ershad: 'The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions' (8th amendment). 'The High Court Division (HCD) of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh declared the removal of secularism from the Constitution illegal in 2005. The Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh upheld the decision of the HCD and the Constitution was amended in 2011 by the Parliament so that the provision

⁴ Shortly after the Pakistan dictator General Zia ul Haq had died in an air crash, the University of the Punjab published an annotated collection of British newspaper articles on the war of 1971, putting the blame on India while reprinting articles from the Times and other British papers. Interestingly, 'Genocide', the famous article of Anthony Mascarenhas, was not reprinted. The whole enterprise could be interpreted as an attempt to start a discussion on the atrocities of the war, while keeping the official line. Cf. Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza: Why not the whole truth. East Pakistan crisis (March-December 1971). Role of foreign press. Lahore: Centre for South Asian Studies. 1989. – Bhutto made the army, especially President Yahya Khan, responsible. Vide: Mr. Z.A. Buttos's interview to Oriana Fallaci 1972. In: The Bangladesh papers. Lahore: Vanguard, c. 1978, pp. 280-307.

⁵ Article 140 keeps up the principles of the Weimar Constitution of 1919 (Section 'Religion and Religious Societies', articles 137-139, 141).

⁶ Article 136 (1).

⁷ Article 137 (1).

⁸ Vide: the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh [as modified upto 30th June, 1988]. Dhaka, 1988,

for secularism was restored.⁹ Accordingly, article 12 on secularism was re-introduced in the constitution in 2011 (15th amendment).

While Bangladesh is struggling for international recognition of the Genocide 1971, it has become the refuge for the victims of another genocide, namely the Rohingya. In 1971 India saved ten million refugees from her neighbour East Pakistan; now Bangladesh has to look after one million refugees from its neighbour in the east.

The late 1970s saw a first round of ethnic and religious cleansing in Myanmar, the 1980s a second and the last years the third, and by far the largest mass eviction of Rohingya.¹⁰ It has been interpreted as a kind of ‘religious cleansing’ of a Muslim minority by a Buddhist government, and seems to be in line with the present spate of anti-Muslim policy of a Hindu-dominated government in India. But it would be too easy to see it as the outcome of a radicalisation of dominating religious groups. Such ‘cleansings’ have not much to do with religion. They are rather the instrumentalization of beliefs and fears. Like the proverbial scapegoat, the victims of such visitations are seen as the cause of all ills and do not enjoy any special interest or compassion. They can be easily exchanged by any other. Secularism as stipulated by Mujib should have been a way to prevent it.

The threat of radicalisation that is the topic of this conference, could be subsumed under the term ‘fascism’. Of course, one should be careful to use the word, but if we follow Umberto Eco, the Italian philosopher and writer, most general properties of fascist ideology apply increasingly to South Asian politics.¹¹ They certainly applied to the rulers of Pakistan viz-a-viz their East Pakistani compatriots and even more so to the Razakars al-Badr and Al-Shams, who acted as local guides for soldiers of the Pakistan army who rarely had any command of Bangla.

In an essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Kelly M. Greenhill writes about ‘people as weapons’ and ‘demographic bombing’, more specifically ‘Strategically engineered mass movement of civilians into and away from their area of territorial control.’¹² Wars often imply forced migration, peace settlements thereafter cause more forced migration. And often those who want to migrate are not allowed to leave, while those from outside are denied immigration.

Worse, segments of the local population are defined as ‘alien’, denied citizen rights and pressurized to leave. It appears that the victims of any such citizen law are victimized for no other reason than to be used as scapegoats for political gains. Such attempts follow a simple pattern: Potential victims should be not too powerful, while being accused to be a serious danger for the society. Ideally they can easily be made out by ethnicity, language, religion, area, culture, profession, or social status, creating a world of ‘them’ and ‘us’. In real life, such bracketing of people can be difficult, leaving the power of definition to the gatekeepers of the system.

⁹ Jahid Hossain Bhuiyan: Secularism in the constitution of Bangladesh. In: *The Journal of legal pluralism and unofficial law*. [Milton Park:] Taylor and Francis. 49(2017)2, pp. 204-227. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07329113.2017.1341479?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=rjlp20> (5.3.2020).

¹⁰ Vide the 2014 Al-Jazeera documentary ‘The hidden genocide’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSkZlglk76-E> (6.3.2020).

¹¹ Umberto Eco: *Ur-Fascism*. In: *The New York Review of Books*. June 22, 1995.

¹² Kelly M. Greenhill: demographic bombing. People as weapons in Syria and beyond. In: *Foreign Affairs*, 17 December 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-12-17/demographic-bombing> (4.3.2020)

This certainly was the role of the collaborators of the Pakistan army in the war of liberation and explains, why they were hated so much. After Bangladesh Independence, Pakistan turned against them, refusing the so called Biharis, who had fought for Pakistan twice, namely in 1947 as well as 1971, to move to Pakistan. Hundred of thousand got stranded in Bangladesh. Most prominent among their camps is ‘Geneva Camp’ in Dhaka.¹³ The name reflects frustrated hopes and expectations set in the United Nations. After Pakistan stopped taking in any Biharis, the remaining became stateless. Since a court ruling in 2008 they are entitled to obtain a Bangladeshi passport, except those refugees who were adults at the time of Bangladesh Liberation War.¹⁴

As an irony of history, Pakistan, the country that caused ten million Bengalis to flee and refused to take in its fellow combatants, two decades later had to receive millions of refugees itself.¹⁵ India, secular by constitution, has made it clear that Muslim refugees from South Asian countries are unwelcome. Millions see themselves in what they consider to be their country threatened by eviction, since they are required to prove their Indian citizenship – in a country where millions never got a birth certificate or any other proof of citizenship. Even Bhutan, considered to be a Shangri La, threw out a considerable part of its inhabitants after a new citizenship law was introduced in 1958 and modified in 1985.¹⁶ Relatively, Bhutan became the least welcoming and liberal country in South Asia.

In all cases, a mixture of religion, ethnicity, language and culture has been used to define any unwanted group. Religion is only one of these factors: In the Liberation war Hindus were most targeted, although the majority of the refugees in India might have been Muslims.¹⁷ But there was also the subliminal perception (if not open suspicion) that the Bengalees were ‘lesser Muslims’.¹⁸ But, of course, neither ‘Operation Searchlight’ nor the following liberation war was because of religion. Likewise, India’s new Citizen Law certainly is anti-Muslim, but part of a policy to define Indians anew. Militancy against ‘illegal immigrants to India’ has been most pronounced in Assam, where students found out that Assamese speakers made out less than half of the population. Like in East Pakistan, the movement started with language and had its roots in fears of losing power, influence and job prospects. The civil war in Sri Lanka was not about religion: The Tamil Tigers claimed to speak for all Tamils, Hindus, Christians and Muslims. Similarly the Rohingya: Distinct from the dominant (Buddhist) group of Rakhine State by descent, language and religion they have been victims of violent clashes since the 1940s¹⁹

What Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had in mind, when he spoke of secularism, was that the state and

¹³ ‘Mymensingh camp, Dhaka. Urdu speakers have suffered discrimination and extreme poverty since the country’s war of liberation. Despite a law introduced in 2008 that guarantees citizenship for Bihari refugees, they face serious obstacles to obtaining citizenship documents such as passports and birth certificates.’ Cf. ‘Stranded Pakistanis’ living in camps in Bangladesh – in pictures. In: The Guardian, 11 August 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/gallery/2014/aug/11/stranded-pakistanis-camps-bangladesh-bihari-in-pictures> (4.3.2020).

¹⁴ Stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh. In: Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stranded_Pakistanis_in_Bangladesh (4.3.2020)

¹⁵ Although it has to be conceded that the Afghan refugees could move freely in the country and take up jobs.

¹⁶ The Bhutanese Citizenship Act of 1958, officially the Nationality Law of Bhutan, 1958.

¹⁷ There are no serious numbers available.

¹⁸ Navine Murshid: The genocide of 1971 and the politics of justice. In: Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman (eds.): Routledge handbook of contemporary Bangladesh. London: Routledge, 2015. p. 52.

¹⁹ Cf. K. M. Mohiuddin: Rohingya. In: Sirajul Islam (chief editor): Banglapedia. National encyclopedia of Bangladesh. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. 2003. Vol. 8, pp. 451-452,

government must not be defined by any particular religion and that the various groups of people in Bangladesh, irrespective of religion or any other classification, should live in peace together.

This also requires not to leave the Rohingya to any outside agitation. There is no dearth of rumours that extremist organizations, funded by Arabs and the Pakistan ISI, are agitating among the refugees. In the case of Pakistan it may not be religious missionary zeal, but most of all part of the low profile asymmetric war against India, besides an opportunity to take revenge for the defeat of 1971 and the break up of the country.

It should be remembered that the Pakistan government after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan willfully and consciously left the youth in the refugee camps to radical clerics who prepared and trained them in the madrasa for the Jihad in Afghanistan. This mistake is not to be repeated. It is necessary not to disrupt the education of the young Rohingya in the refugee camps and to provide all of them a perspective.²⁰

²⁰ After the government of Bangladesh banned Rohingya students from continuing their education, a beginning has been made for students up to grade nine with UN assistance. ‘Great news’: Bangladesh allows education for Rohingya children. Al Jazeera, 30 Jan 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/news-bangladesh-education-rohingya-children-200130061617667.html> (1.3.2020).