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On the political economy of violence in South Asia

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This conference is to deal with security challenges and threats from violent extremism and the role of government and civil society in Bangladesh and South Asia. In March the European Bangladesh Forum had organized a conference in The Hague on a related topic, i.e. the international recognition of the 1971 Genocide in Bangladesh. A genocide is an extreme form of collective violence, orchestrated by the state, whereas we tend to associate violent extremism rather with non-state actors. Actually, it is more often instigated and/or supported by authority, secular as well as religious.

As an economist I have been trying to understand developments with emphasis on the interdependencies of economics and politics, in short, on the political economy and in this case the political economy of violence. This is, of course, only one of the many facets of violence.

Genocide has become an omnibus term: If you google genocide, you receive more than 73 million links. If you combine it with India you get 33 million, with China 32 million, with Pakistan 12 million, with Afghanistan 10 million and with Bangladesh 5.8 million. There are fewer links for Sri Lanka (4.7 m), Kashmir (4.6 m), Rohingya (2.6 m) and Nepal (2.4).¹ More recent events get more attention. After almost half a century the Bangladesh Genocide is already history. But it is necessary to keep up the memory. If we want it officially recognized, we also should be sure what exactly should be remembered and by whom. In the Bangladesh case it has not only to be acknowledged by the world community, by even more the perpetrators. The problem is that most Pakistani are too young to remember, and if they know anything at all, they only know a sanitized, official version, i.e. how Pakistan became the victim of arch enemy evil 'Hindu India'. If you look at Pakistani history books, there hardly is any mentioning of why and how the country broke up.²

Obviously, violence is not a privilege of any particular world region. Violence comes in many forms and I shall not be in a position to say that there is more or less violence at any particular place. Like any development, violence has its own dynamics and if we aspire to have less violence we should know not only the many forms of violence and its reasons, but also how it develops and turns seemingly civil societies into a frenzy of destruction.

Personally, I never became victim of violence during the years I spent in South Asia, rather the opposite: I met friendly, peaceful and hospitable people, albeit under conditions and circumstances that at times were and still are violent. I started my professional work in early

¹ Checked on 17 September 2019.

² A rare exception is Hasan-Askari Rizvi: 'The military action was extremely brutal ...The exact number of people killed by the military action and guerilla activity during March-December may never be known. Bangladesh claimed that three million people were killed and charged the Pakistani troops with genocide, rape of thousands of Bengali women, displacement of several million people, and a heavy damage to property. The Pakistani authorities denied these charges for understandable reasons and a top army commander gave an unrealistically low figure of 30,000 people killed during that period'. Hasan Askari RIZVI: *The military and politics in Pakistan 1947-86*. 4th (updated) ed. Lahore: Progressive 1987 (1974), pp. 137-138.

1971 and so became a distant witness to one of the most violent developments in modern South Asia, namely the Bangladesh Genocide.

Arriving first in Karachi and moving up to the north, on the road to Peshawar, just outside the new capital Islamabad, I spotted the Nicolson Obelisk and Monument right on the Margalla Pass. Later I read about Brigadier General John Nicolson of the Bengal Army, the praetorian guard of the East India Company, a private merchant company that was successfully looting India with the blessings of Her Majesty. Nicolson, the ‘Lion of the Punjab’, described as sadist and the ‘great imperial psychopath’ died in Delhi when fighting the ‘sepoys’ and ‘mutineers’ in the great Indian uprising of 1857. That obviously was reason for the Imperial power to commemorate its hero at such a prominent place, but why was it still standing there decades after Pakistan had won its freedom? And it is still standing there.

It is a perfect example of how the new dominion identified with the colonial power and that applied even more to an army that had no role in Independence and behaved, especially in the eastern ‘wing’ of the country, like a colonial army, with little knowledge for sympathy for the local population. And as much as the colonial army had been set up to safeguard the economic and financial interests of the Company, the new ‘national’ army served the economic and financial interests of the new government, namely the foreign exchange receipts of jute related exports and the ‘misery dividend’ of foreign aid, earned by the Province of East Bengal, later East Pakistan. Economic exploitation of the 1960s was less than that of the 1950s, but by that time the damage already had been done and under Martial Rule the army more and more served their own self interests.³

In the same year I first saw the Nicolson Monument I came to Dhaka and could see the many scars of the War of Independence, notably in Jagannath Hall of the University. I shall not delve into the stories of individual violence during Partition of 1947 and during the War of 1971. They all show the interconnectedness of personal, financial, political or religious reasoning that lead to violence even among neighbours, colleagues and perceived friends. Economically, it took Bangladesh decades to recover, while psychologically the scars of the genocide live on.

With Independence, Bangladesh’s ordeal was not over. The new country suffered from political and economic sanctions. Without India’s help the Liberation War might have dragged on with many more casualties. Outside India and the Eastern Bloc only some international organizations and European countries came to the help of the new nation, while the USA, the ‘Islamic’ states and China showed little sympathy when it was needed most. This kind of structural violence stopped only after the murder of Bangabandu Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, members of his family, and friends. Two years into independence Bangladesh suffered a famine, not so much because of a poor harvest, but because of lack of foresight, poor management and the US embargo after the Cuba deal. The chaotic 1974 triggered Mujib’s desperate attempts at saving the country (and his government), followed by the coup d’etat of August 1975.

³ See my: From regional disparities to mass violence. On the political economy of genocide in Bangladesh. In: Mofidul Haque, Umme Wara (eds.): Bangladesh genocide and the issue of justice. Papers presented in the International Conference held at Heidelberg University, Germany, 4-5 July, 2013, organized by South Asia Institute (Heidelberg University), South Asia Democratic Forum (Brussels), Liberation War Museum (Dhaka). Dhaka: Liberation War Museum, 2013, pp. 38-60.
<https://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/abt/intwep/zingel/BD-HD2013.pdf>

Independent Bangladesh has seen other forms of structural violence not only by outsiders, but also by its own doing, as against its tribal population, or miserable labour conditions that led to the death of thousands of workers in factories that went up in flames or collapsed.

Water wars, forced migration and global warming have become common threats of the highest order. ‘Structural violence, [...] a term commonly ascribed to Johan Galtung [...] refers to a form of violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.’⁴ Genocide often is the result of structural violence, the outcome of pure egoism, no concern or regard for the victims, as is the case of water withdrawal by an upper riparian (in case of the Ganges), forced migration and ethnic cleansing (Rohingya) or damage of the natural environment (global warming and a rising sea level).

Let us take migration, forced or not: It leads to changes in the status of migrants as well as of the local population, who easily become victim to extreme views of rights and obligations. This can be seen all over South Asia.

That India finally entered the war in 1971 was because of ten million refugees pouring into the country. Only a quick victory would create a situation, where these would go home. Today we have a similar situation, but now with refugees flowing into and not out of Bangladesh. It is doubtful that Bangladesh can convince or coerce Myanmar to take back the Rohingyas and guarantee a safe return. India and the western industrialized countries are too happy to have roped in Myanmar, although China exerts still some influence there. No major power can be expected to force Myanmar to take back the refugees. This is alarming. We have similar scenarios all over the world. Travelling has become so much easier even across oceans and deserts. And it is not the poorest ones who can afford the substantial fees that ‘helpers’ charge along the way. India has shown no inclination to host any of the Rohingyas. For the time being the Rohingyas got stuck in one of the poorest corners of Bangladesh and present a fertile ground for religious extremism, funded by outside sources. Depriving the refugees of any education drives them into the arms of extremists,⁵ in line with Pakistan’s policy to leave Afghan children to be prepared in *madrassas* for the *jihād* in Afghanistan rather than have them educated in proper schools. Depriving them of access to the internet, as happened in India (Kashmir) and Bangladesh (Rohingya) is as bad.

This becomes clear if we look at the citizen rights in South Asia: Myanmar and Bhutan have restricted citizenship since long. Pakistan stripped ‘Biharis’, Urdu speaking Pakistani stranded in Bangladesh, of their citizenship. Sentiments against ‘illegal immigration’ are raised in India,⁶

⁴ Structural violence. In: Wikipedia (17.9.2019).

⁵ Sunaina Kumar: Akter, 20, expelled from university for being Rohingya. Al Jazeera, 17 September 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/20-year-refugee-expelled-university-rohingya-190916060043568.html> (17.9.2019)

⁶ In 2016 the Indian Home Minister lamented 20 million illegal Bangladeshi in India. Two crore illegal Bangladeshis living in India: Government. In: Indian Express, New Delhi, 16 November 2016. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/two-crore-illegal-bangladeshis-living-in-india-governme-nt-4379162/> (accessed 29.5.2019).

with little regard for facts⁷ and figures⁸. Millions are threatened by the new laws.⁹ Former immigration countries like the USA set a terrible example by starting to throw out millions of ‘illegal’ immigrants. Victims of such policies are easy prey for extremists.

Global warming, another example of structural violence, is expected to hit Bangladesh especially. Although the reaction of the delta swamps on a rising sea level are not clear, it is commonly assumed that millions will be affected and try to leave the country. The expectation that other countries will welcome climate refugees from Bangladesh or will subscribe to a Right to Migration appears to be unfounded. Rather the opposite happens: More and more countries try to shed parts of their population as immigrants with no citizen rights and seal their borders.

Denial famously is the last stage of Gregory H. Stanton’s, the founder of Genocides Watch, ten (formerly eight) stages of genocide. But today the danger is no longer denial, but indifference and lack of interest. If we really want to make people aware of the Bangladesh Genocide, especially in Pakistan, more research is needed, for example on Operation Blitz, a plan that the Pakistan Army had prepared at the beginning of 1971.¹⁰ Very little on this precursor of Operation Searchlight can be found in the literature. It would be an important source to give weight to the argument of plans of a systematically extinction of segments of East Bengal society, as is required as a precondition for an official recognition of genocide.¹¹

The material has to be presented in a form available and acceptable, especially also in Pakistan, and that means by the new electronic media not only in Bangla and English, but also in Urdu. After almost half a century has passed since 1971, it should be time look at events in a joint effort by historians and other concerned persons from Bangladesh and Pakistan, as has been done in Europe by history commissions with members from former enemies.

The final question: Does ignorance breed violence and extremism? Most probably not, not necessarily. But it presents a fertile breeding ground for violent and extreme ideas.

⁷ Migrants from the northeast of the subcontinent to western India are all perceived as Muslim Bangladeshi. Actually almost all Bengali speakers live in east and northeast India.

⁸ In 2011 there were just 1.9 million Bengali speakers among the 900 million inhabitants of north, west and south India, two per cent of the population. Census of India 2011. Paper 1 of 2018: Language. India, states and union territories (table C-16). New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General, 2011, p.23. http://censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/C-16_25062018_NEW.pdf (accessed 29.5.2019).

⁹ The new amendment to the Citizenship Act 1955, if passed, ‘will grant citizenship to religious groups such as Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists from neighbouring countries - but not to Muslims.’ Bilal Kuchay: India: fear among Muslims over planned nationwide citizens list. Al Jazeera, 10 September 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/fear-muslims-planned-nationwide-india-citizens-list-190910093358102.html> (17.9.2019).

¹⁰ Husain Haqqani quotes Major General Khadim Husain Raja: ‘General Yahya had visualized the possibility of a military crackdown accompanied by the suspension of all political parties activities’, preparing ‘a plan called Operation Blitz’ at the beginning of 1971. Husain Haqqani: Reimagining Pakistan. Transforming a dysfunctional nuclear state. Noida: Harper Collins. 2018. pp. 92-93. – Major General Hakeem Arshad Qureshi writes: ‘ In East Pakistan, a plan codenamed ‘Blitz’ was drawn up to take care of any serious internal security situation. It was subsequently updated by General Tikka Khan and renamed ‘Searchlight’. We received orders on 25 March 1971 to implement Operation Blitz and re-establish the writ of the government in our area of responsibility,’ Hakeem Arshad Qureshi: The 1971 Indo-Pak war. A soldier’s narrative. Karachi: Oxford UP. 2002., p. 32. – ‘Moreover, most importantly, if the political transfer of power to the elected representatives had been implemented as set out at the time of the launching of Operation Blitz (Torch Light), ...’. Ibid, p. 287.

¹¹ For definitions of ‘genocide’ see my ‘Remembering the Bangladesh Genocide 1971’, a contribution to the EBF conference in The Hague on March 23 2019. <https://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/abt/intwep/zingel/BD-Genocide-DenHaag2019.pdf>