Political Conflict in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Ever since the inception of Bangladesh in 1972 its politics have been featured by several types of seemingly endemic conflict, some of which have been associated with either periodic outbursts of violence or prolonged relatively low-key armed confrontations. The objective of the present study is that of placing the different conflict situations in proper perspective, and examining their highly ramified causal connections which include de-stabilising external influences, inter-group divergences of interests and aspirations within the country, economic stagnation, and the persistence of poverty.

Introduction

Several basic facts need to be highlighted in a general summary of the experiences of the People's Republic of Bangladesh since it joined the ranks of sovereign nation states in January 1972 at the conclusion of the brief but bloody war of secession from Pakistan. Inheriting as it did the Indo-Pakistan border of the Bengal region hurriedly defined by the Radcliffe Commission at the termination of British rule in the Indian sub-continent in 1947, Bangladesh has continued to suffer from a territorial demarcation that pays scant regard to geographical realities concerning national security and integration, environmental management, and survival needs of its large and rapidly expanding population. Secondly, despite modest advances in production and in the satisfaction of basic livelihood needs, the large majority of the people of Bangladesh continue to live in dire poverty, the country as a whole constituting the world's largest agglomeration of people suffering from extreme deprivation and want. Thirdly, the overall scarcity of land and other physical resources in relation to the size of the population, and the frequent exposure of its

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territory—eastern two-thirds of the Ganga-Brahmaputra deltaic plain—to floods and droughts, have persisted as seemingly insurmountable constraints on development effort, also intensifying the divergences of interests in resource use both internally among the people of Bangladesh as well as between Bangladesh and its neighbours. Finally, Bangladesh has continued to suffer from internal political instability. Since 1972, following a brief spell of democratic governance which ended with efforts by the country's first elected leader to move towards a system of one-party presidential rule, there was a prolonged phase that lasted up to the early 1990s during which Bangladesh remained under the control of autocratic military regimes. The more recent attempts towards democratisation of the polity, though not entirely devoid of success, have remained tenuous mainly on account of intense factionalism based on personal rivalries (rather than on divergences of ideology) within the elite (of which the military still constitutes a powerful component), frequent recourse to disruptive mass protest by the politically articulate segments of the electorate (especially trade unions and educated youth), and the continuing failure of those who rule the country to fulfil the economic aspiration of the people.

To a study of conflict in Bangladesh the experiences outlined above are, no doubt, of fundamental relevance. The vulnerability of the country to destabilising external influences, cross-border disputes concerning territorial claims and movement of people, its constant exposure to the destructive impact of natural hazards (at least some of which are perceived as being exacerbated by practices concerning resource use in the neighbouring countries), the scarcity of arable land and water for agriculture, corruption and inefficiency widely believed to be associated with the activities of government, and, above all, the persistence of poverty, provide fertile ground for the emergence of the type of unrest which finds expression in violent conflict. That Bangladesh has lacked political stability and has experienced periodic outbursts of violence cannot be disputed. Yet, in apparent paradox, when armed conflict is looked at from comparative regional perspectives, one finds that sustained armed confrontation between groups identifiable on the basis of either distinctive cultural traits (such as language, religion, caste or tribe), or socio-economic class differentiations, has tended to lie outside the mainstreams of Bangladesh politics, relatively small in respect of scale and largely confined to a militant movement which represents the interests of marginalised tribal people constituting about one percent of the country's population. From such a perspective it is possible to draw a contrast between Bangladesh, on the one hand, and India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, on the other.

PROCESSES OF STATE FORMATION

Cultural Identity of the Bengali Muslims

In studies that attempt to trace the historical roots of Bangladesh identity, it has been asserted that, at least from the early centuries of the Christian era, Bengal was inhabited by people of two distinctive cultural groups—*Vanga* in its eastern parts and *Gauda* in the west. Until about the early 13th century when Muslim influences began to penetrate the Bengal region, the *Vanga* people, unlike the *Gauda*, are said to have remained relatively free from Aryan-Hindu cultural influences.[1] This *Vanga* distinctiveness was evidently enhanced during the period of Muslim dominance of India as a result of a steady process of Islamization through both immigration of Muslims from other parts of the Indian sub-continent as well as mass conversion of the *Vanga* to Islam.[2] According to some historians, the division of Bengal by the British in 1905 into two provincial units corresponded roughly to the historical *Vanga-Gauda* dichotomy of this region. The implication of this arguable assertions is that, since East Pakistan as defined in 1947 (which, in 1972, became Bangladesh), though not exactly coterminous with the British India province of East Bengal demarcated in 1905,[3] consisted almost entirely of *Vanga* territory, Bangladesh possesses a cultural distinctiveness the roots of which could be traced back into the past for well over one thousand five hundred years.

The foregoing skeletal reconstruction of the history of Bangladesh identity could be subject to certain qualifications such as that implicit in a general observation by Anil Seal cited below on the indigenous cultural milieu of India in the early phase of British rule. It has as much relevance to Bengal of the 19th century as to any other area of the sub-continent.

> "In so shapeless, so jumbled a bundle of societies, there were not two nations, there was not one nation, there was no nation at all. What was India?—a graveyard of old nationalities and the mother of new nationalisms struggling to be born."[4]

Regardless of the importance which one may attach to the perception of a cultural distinctiveness of Bangladesh that extends into the distant past, it seems clear that vestiges of a national consciousness began to develop among the Muslims of Bengal at least from the early decades of the 20th century. During this time, as shown in several authoritative works,[5] the idea that Bengali Muslims stand distinct, on the one hand, from their Hindu counterparts in their adherence to Islam, and on the other, from the Muslims outside Bengal on the basis of their language,

came to be articulated with increasing frequency and vigour, as twin strands of nationalist perception which entailed the rejection of not only the concept of an all-Indian national unity then in vogue among leaders of the *Swaraj* movement, but also that of a pan-Islamic cultural identity being espoused by the numerically minute Urdu-speaking Muslim elite of Bengal and, in course of time, by the leadership of the all-India Muslim League. Though linguistic nationalism among Bengali Muslims was eclipsed by the intensifying Hindu-Muslim rivalry in the period leading up to the termination of British rule, it re-emerged as the principal motive force of nationalism in East Pakistan soon after independence.

Hindu-Muslim Rivalry in Pre-Partition Bengal

In several writings on the history of Bangladesh[6] there is special emphasis on the long drawn-out conflict of economic interests between the Muslims and the Hindus of Bengal as an important element of nascent Bangladeshi nationalism. According to Ahmed[7] the potential for Hindu-Muslim tension in Bengal was inherent to the socio-economic structure that had evolved in the region under the British. In the districts of East Bengal, the so-called 'Caste Hindus' (as distinct from those of the Scheduled Castes who, along with the Muslim peasantry, constituted the economically depressed majority of the Bengali population) owned as much as 70% of the arable land. Moreover, a disproportionately large share of money lending and other intermediary transactions in this area had remained in the hands of the Caste Hindus who where also over-represented in urban employment including those in administrative and professional services. Though the rentier classes in the rural areas of East Bengal did include both the more affluent Urdu-speaking Muslims (descendants of immigrants during Moghul times) as well as a minority of Bengali Muslims who had achieved upward social mobility either through education or as a result of new economic opportunities generated in the production of Jute, the image of the Bengali Hindu as the exploiter of the impoverished Bengali Muslim is said to have been employed for purposes of political mobilisation of the Muslim peasantry in Bengal through organisations such as the *Krishak Praja* Party (later, the *Krishak Sramic* Party) which, after the death of its leader Fazlul Haq in the late 1950s, was absorbed by the *Awami League*—the party that spearheaded the Bengali Muslim challenge against West Pakistani dominance.

Language and National Consciousness in East Pakistan

The demarcation of East Pakistan at the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 was an exercise in working out a compromise between the Muslim League demand for a separate national entity for the Muslims of British India as enunciated in its Lahore Resolution of 1940, and the needs as perceived by the Radcliffe Commission to ensure the survival of the port city of Calcutta as the principal gateway to the northern plains of India. This latter consideration involved the retention of the western segment of the Gangetic delta (Hoogly, Bhagirarthi and Nadia catchments) within the Indian side of the border as an integral part of the hinterland of Calcutta, and thus represented a deviation from the demographic principle employed in the demarcation of the Indo-Pakistan boundary in most other areas. Accordingly, the Muslim-majority district of Murshidabad came to be placed within Indian territory, in compensation for which the Khulna District and several small areas in which the Hindus constituted the majority were awarded to Pakistan.

The Hindu-Muslim civil war that accompanied the partition resulted in massive cross-border movements of refugees, and a substantial rearrangement of the Bengali population on ethnic lines. The related estimates suggest that the in-flow of Muslims into East Pakistan, especially from the Greater Calcutta area, was numerically larger than the out-flow of Hindus into Indian territory. Despite this, however, East Pakistan as defined by the Radcliffe Commission retained the characteristic of an area of mixed ethnicity in which the Muslims accounted for only about three quarters of the total population (Table 1).

Table 1
Ethnic Composition of the Population of Pakistan, 1951

	Percentage of population	
	East Pakistan	West Pakistan
Muslims	76.8	97.1
Scheduled Caste Hindus	12.0	1.1
Caste Hindus	10.0	0.5
Others (including tribal groups)	1.2	1.3

Source: Government of Pakistan (1955), Table 2.

The political trends of East Pakistan in its early years of existence as a province of Pakistan were featured by a resurgence of ethno-nationalist sentiments among the Bengali Muslims. Following the large-scale exodus of the relatively more affluent Caste Hindus from this region in the wake

of the partition, a semblance of peaceful coexistence between the Muslim majority and the Hindu segment of the population (which now consisted almost entirely of those in the lower income strata) had been achieved. These developments were paralleled by a gradual shift of emphasis from religion (Islam) to language (Bengali) as the principal unifying force among the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan. The factors that contributed to this upsurge of linguistic nationalism are linked in one way or another to the gradual estrangement of relations between the two 'wings' of Pakistan.

Language came into the forefront of contentious political issues almost immediately after the inception of Pakistan in the form of a factor that had economic rather than cultural connotations. As noted earlier, in the pre-1947 period, the Urdu-speaking Muslims of Bengal, though a small minority, constituted a part of the economic elite of the region. Politically aligned as they were to the Muslim League, they generally remained outside the electoral support base of the Bengali Muslim leaders of this time like Fazlul Haq and Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy. The numerical strength of this group is said to have increased as a result of an in-flow of Urdu-speaking migrants from West Bengal and Bihar in the wake of the partition, and from West Pakistan itself. According to an estimate furnished by Ahmed,[8] by 1951, Urdu-speakers accounted for about 20% of the total population of East Pakistan. More significantly, most of the economic opportunities, especially those in the tertiary sector, left vacant by the Caste Hindus in their out-migration to India, and potentially available to the Bengali Muslims, were grabbed by the newly arrived Urdu-speaking immigrants. According to Bertocci,[9] the position of privilege thus acquired by the latter group was seen by the local Muslims as a part of a process of 'colonisation' sponsored by the government of Pakistan.

The rivalry between these two linguistic groups assumed more concrete shape as a specific national dispute concerning language when, in 1952, the central government of Pakistan reaffirmed its intention of making Urdu the 'national language' of the entire country, in disregard of the demand, evidently backed by the large majority of people in East Pakistan including its Bengali-speaking Hindu minority, for Bengali to be accorded a similar status. Agitation against this measure, which included riots and street demonstrations, evoked harshly repressive measures, an enhancement of the importance of language as an ingredient of national consciousness in East Pakistan, and a further alienation of the Bengali Muslims from the main centre of political power of Pakistan.[10] An important step in the process of language-based political mobilisation in East Pakistan was marked by the decision of the *Awami* Muslim League in

1951 (led at that time by Suhrawardy) to delete the word 'Muslim' from its name, and accommodate non-Muslim minorities in its ranks. The impact of these developments was reflected in the results of the provincial elections held in 1954, at which the coalition of Bengali political organisations (*Awami* League, *Krishak Sramic* Party, and a few smaller parties) secured 223 out of the total of 237 seats allocated to the Muslims of East Pakistan, reducing the number of seats won by the Muslim League to 10.[11] The large majority of seats allocated at this election to the non-Muslims of the province were also won by political allies of the coalition.

The results of the election could be interpreted as reflecting a clear crystallisation of East Pakistani interests which, within that part of Pakistan, were now being held together at least symbolically by the over-arching language ties among the large majority of its people. Several measures were adopted by the government of Pakistan to diffuse the language controversy. These included the constitutional recognition of Bengali as a national language of the country in late 1954. By this stage, however, the Bengali grievances against the Pakistan government had extended into other issues such as those concerning economic discrimination and the increasing concentration of political power in the western segment of the country.

Economic Grievances of East Pakistan

With a per capita national income equivalent to US $ 50, Pakistan in the early 1950s ranked among the least developed countries of the South Asian region. The dislocations of industry and trade caused by the partition were more severe in their impact on Pakistan than they were on India. Apart from the gigantic tasks of reconstructing the economy and re-settlement of an estimated 10 million refugees, Pakistan had also to place high priority on disputes with India concerning territorial boundaries, control over Kashmir, and utilisation of Indus river water.

Within Pakistan, there were wide ranging regional variations in both immediate requirements in rehabilitation and relief as well as long term needs and prospects of development. West Pakistan had the advantages of a superior resource base, a dynamic pool of manpower skills in industrial management and trade consisting mainly of migrants from western India, and a marginally higher physical quality of life in its main population concentrations (metropolitan Karachi and Punjab). From the viewpoint of long-term development, the prospects were substantially better in this segment of the country. On the other hand, if poverty alleviation and regional equity were to be prime considerations in the national development goals, East Pakistan, with its substantially higher

population density, greater vulnerability to natural disasters, lower levels of productivity, income and consumption, the almost total absence of an industrial base, and extreme backwardness in economic infrastructure (Table 2), demanded the greater focus of effort.

Table 2
Levels of Development: East Pakistan and West Pakistan
Selected Indicators, c.1951

	East Pakistan	West Pakistan
Average density of population (persons per sq. mile)	777	259
Gross Regional Product per capita (Rs.)	293	342
Per capita cereal consumption (oz/day)	14.9	15.7
Adult literacy rate (%)	21.1	31.4
School enrolment at secondary level (per 1,000 of population)	12.5	15.1
Urban population (% of total population)	9.4	14.7
Share of the total labour force in the agricultural sector (%)	83.9	71.0
Value of product in manufacturing (in Rs. million)	472	961
Share of modern large-scale industry in the Gross Regional Product (%)	0.06	4.3

Sources: Peach, Uzair and Rucker, 1959; Sobhan, 1974, 1993; Stern, 1971[12]

From its inception the central government of Pakistan appeared to be insensitive to the objective economic needs of the eastern 'wing' of the country especially in matters concerning the Bengali population of that area. For example, the preference for Urdu-speaking immigrants in the recruitment of employees in the state sector was blatantly discriminatory. Again, the compensation of losses that resulted from the ban on the export of raw jute to the mills in the Indian side of the border (one of the most important sources of income to the relatively more affluent Muslims of pre-partition Bengal) was ineffective. Moreover, the main beneficiaries of government sponsored measures towards the development within East Pakistan of a jute milling industry in collaboration with the private sector were certain favoured non-Bengali business houses. Disaster relief in times of natural calamity was perfunctory. More generally, it became apparent with the passage of time that macro-economic policies of the Pakistan government were not only discriminatory but also exploitative in respect of their impact on the Bengali people of the country.

The specific manifestations of this discrimination and exploitation have been examined in detail and from various perspectives in several

scholarly writings.[13] Most of them have highlighted the adverse effects of the central government practices relating to fixing of the exchange rate, imposing controls on external trade, regulation of the internal terms of trade, taxation, licensing of industrial ventures, and allocation of foreign aid and investment to the provinces, all of which, retarded development in East Pakistan, and some of which caused a considerable drain of income from the East to the western 'wing' of the country. To present in summary form some extracts from these writings, up to the mid-1960s, East Pakistan, though generating about 60% of the country's export earnings, received only about 30% of the national imports. The retention of an over-valued rupee in relation to other currencies throughout the 1950s was evidently a form of indirect taxation on goods produced for export, and a subsidisation of goods imported for consumption or capital development, having an overall effect of an income transfer from East to the West. In addition, East Pakistan is said to have suffered from a constant deficit in the trade between the two 'wings' which increased from an annual average of Rs. 162 million in the early 1950s to about Rs. 425 million in the 1960s. Of the total quantum of foreign aid received from 1948/49 to 1968/69 (valued at about Rs. 61.6 billion) only an estimated 31.4% was allocated to East Pakistan. Over this same period, as Sobhan has shown,[14] East Pakistan received only about 30% of the overall total of government expenditure in Pakistan. Meanwhile, especially during the Ayub Khan regime (1958-69), there was a trend towards a spectacular concentration of wealth among a small group of West Pakistani entrepreneurs who came to constitute a politically powerful national super-elite.[15]

Throughout the 1950s and the 60s, the discriminatory policies and practices outlined above continued to retard the pace of economic progress in East Pakistan, resulting in a steady widening of the disparities between the two regional components of the country (Table 3). The central government paid scant attention to an East Pakistani demand for its development planning to be undertaken within the framework of a separate regional entity, rationalising its policies with reference to the greater resource potential in the western segment of the country. By the early 1960s, the agitation for economic autonomy for East Pakistan had taken precedence over earlier demands concerning language and greater representation at decision-making levels of the central government.

Table 3
Rates of Development: East Pakistan and West Pakistan
(selected indicators)

		East Pakistan	West Pakistan
Average annual rate of economic growth:	1950-59	1.9	2.7
	1960-69	4.3	6.4
Per capita income (Rs):	1949/50	288	351
	1969/70	331	533
Per capita grain consumption (cal/day):	1949/50	1,870	1,930
	1969/70	1,860	2,190
Share of industry in the Gross Regional Product	1969/70	8.9	19.6

Sources: Peach, Uzair & Rucker, 1959; Sobhan, 1974, 1993; Stern, 1971

Political Marginalisation of East Pakistan

Electoral politics of Pakistan in its first decade operated concurrently with the foregoing processes of economic discrimination to contribute to the gradual alienation of East Pakistan from national affairs. In the immediate aftermath of independence, central government power was firmly in the hands of Mohammad Ali Jinnah—the visionary leader of the Muslim League who, for nearly a decade, had spearheaded the process of converting the idea of a Muslim nation state in the sub-continent into a political reality. Even at this early stage, however, the Muslim League, though firmly in the grip of Jinnah, is said to have consisted of three main factions—the old landed aristocracy and religious leaders mainly from the Punjab and Sind, the Muhajirs (Muslim immigrants from India) concentrated largely in the principal urban areas of West Pakistan, and the supporters of the League in East Pakistan.[16]

From the early 1950s, for reasons that have already been discussed, the electoral support for the League from East Pakistan dwindled. Concurrently, under a weak leadership after the death of Jinnah in September 1948, the divergent group interests within the Muslim League had also became increasingly pronounced, leading to intense factional rivalries. One of the consequences of this was the development of organised political opposition to the League in West Pakistan, mainly in the form of the growing strength of the newly formed Republican Party. Another was the weakening of East Pakistan's power and influence in the central government. Thus, by the mid-1950s, electoral politics of Pakistan were featured by the dominance of two groups of parties each of which

was largely confined to one or the other of the regional components of the country (Table 4). Moreover, with increasing antipathy towards the central government in East Pakistan, there was a trend towards closing of ranks among its main political parties under the banner of a 'United Front' —a coalition in which the *Awami* League and the *Krishak Sramic* Party, headed respectively by the two foremost Bengali Muslim leaders, Fazlul Haq and Suhrawardy, were the principal partners. According to Sisson and Rose,[17] the intensity of rivalries between the two sets of parties inhibited their collaboration on most matters at the national level. These authors add:

> "The absence of cohesive national leadership and a consensus on constitutional norms made the political system susceptible to incursions of administrative and military power in decision making and to governmental instability. Fragmentation of the political body and provincialisation became permanent features of Pakistani politics that divided east and west."

Table 4
Composition of the Pakistan Provincial Assemblies, 1957

	East Pakistan	West Pakistan
Republican Party	2	178
Muslim League	13	107
Awami League	115	3
National *Awami* Party	36	12
Krishak Sramic Party	54	0
Pakistan National Congress	28	0
Scheduled Caste Federation	26	0
Other parties in East Pakistan	34	0
Total number of seats	308	300

Source: Ahmad, 1963[18]

The political platform of the *Awami* League and the *Krishak Sramic* Party gave prominence to several issues among which economic discrimination remained the most persistent, though perhaps not the most prominent. Secondly, these parties agitated for constitutional provision for greater representation of East Pakistan in the central government; and when the long-awaited constitution of Pakistan adopted in 1956 failed to fulfil their demands in this regard, for greater devolution of political power to East Pakistan. Thirdly, given the religious heterogeneity of East Pakistan, they urged for a secular form of government, and were lukewarm towards the Islamization of the polity, a process for which there

was substantial support from the traditional elite of West Pakistan. Fourthly, although there was a measure of ambivalence in their policy perceptions on India, they were distinctly less hostile towards India than the major parties of West Pakistan—some of the main Indo-Pakistani disputes (especially the dispute over Kashmir) being of little consequence to the burning issues in their part of the country.

The overthrow of civilian rule in Pakistan in 1958 and the adoption of a new constitution formulated under the military regime of Ayub Khan in 1962 were critical steps in the on-going marginalisation of East Pakistan. The new constitution made provision for a highly centralised form of government, vesting powers of veto on the president in regard to all legislation, placing the civil service and the military under the direct control of the president, and drastically curtailing the powers and functions of the provincial legislative assemblies. By the time of promulgation of this constitution, the *Awami* League had gained in strength and popular support, having absorbed some of the smaller parties of East Pakistan along with the remnants of the *Krishak Sramic* Party which, with the exit of the aging Fazlul Khan from active politics, had begun to disintegrate in the late 1950s. At the death of Suhrawardy in 1963, the leadership of the *Awami* League passed into the hands of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Two other factors contributed to the intensification of resentment in East Pakistan against the central government, one of which was the blatant disregard of the Bengali leaders who had mass support in matters concerning key political appointments. It has been pointed out, for example, that all East Pakistanis given cabinet appointments in the centre and governorships of the province during the Ayub regime were either civil servants, pro-government journalists or Muslim League candidates defeated at the provincial elections of 1954.[19] The second was the further widening of economic disparities between the two 'wings' of the country, despite the acceleration of growth—the so-called 'economic miracle'—achieved under military rule.

In the composition of the government during this period, discrimination against the Bengali Muslims was not confined to political appointments, but was much in evidence in other spheres of state power as well. In the period before the military take-over of 1958, the under-representation of this community in civil and military services (Table 5) could have been explained as a legacy of the past—the backwardness of educational facilities in East Bengal, and the preference of the British Indian army to select its cadres from the more 'martial' ethnic groups of the sub-continent. In later times, despite the on-going improvements in educational facilities in East Pakistan, there was a continuing dominance

of these fields of employment, especially at the higher levels, by non-Bengalis, so that, even by 1969, in the bureaucracy, only 3 Bengalis (out of a total of 20) had reached the rank of secretary to a ministry, and in the army (in which the Bengalis accounted for only 6% of the total manpower) there was only 1 Bengali in the total of 25 in the general officer rank.[20] The restrictions placed by the central government upon the elevation of Bengali Muslims to the higher echelons of civil and military services were, indeed, more than a denial of opportunities for upward social mobility through education. Under the military regimes of the 1958-71 period, it meant the almost total exclusion of the Bengali Muslims from all important decision-making levels of the government.

Table 5
Composition of the Bureaucratic and Military Elite of Pakistan, 1955 (number of officers from):

		East Pakistan	West Pakistan
Commissioned Officer Rank:	Army	14	894
	Navy	7	593
	Air Force	60	640
Civil Service:	Secretary	0	19
	Joint Secretary	3	38
	Deputy Secretary	10	123
	Under Secretary	38	510

Source: Jahan, 1972[21]

From the early 1960s, restoration of democracy and regional autonomy were the principal themes of the campaign led by the *Awami* League against the Ayub regime. It took concrete shape in the so-called 'Six-Point Demand' for constitutional reforms announced by Mujibur Rahman in March 1966, which was ostensibly intended to spell out the conditions under which the Bengal region would continue to remain a part of Pakistan. In this announcement there was, first, the demand for restoration of democratic norms of government and the restriction of powers and functions of the centre almost entirely to national defense and foreign affairs. The 'federal' system envisaged in the Six Points went well beyond power-sharing arrangements between the centre and the regions found in federal governments elsewhere. For instance, there was the demand for a separate monetary system for East Pakistan, either in the form of a currency of its own or through fiscal and institutional devices that would prevent unrestricted capital flows between the provinces.

Again, though foreign affairs were to remain a function of the central government, the regional governments were to have the powers to negotiate in matters concerning aid and trade within a general framework of national foreign policy. There was, in addition, the demand for the maintenance of a regional militia or paramilitary force. When examined in the context of Pakistani politics of that time—growing unpopularity of the Ayub regime, intensifying civil unrest in both provinces of the country, and the further consolidation of oppositional forces in East Pakistan—the 'Six-Point Demand' could be seen as a separatist ultimatum rather than an announcement of a negotiating stand for democratisation and devolution.

The Secessionist Movement

It appears in retrospect that by the late 1960s the divergent trends in the politics of the two 'wings' of Pakistan had reached a point of no return. Ayub Khan's desperate moves towards working out a compromise between the main political parties of the country failed in the face of mounting inter-party rivalries. In West Pakistan, militant unrest that had developed in certain localities, and government's increasing reliance on the army to maintain law and order enhanced the power of the military leaders, and culminated in March 1969 in the overthrow of Ayub by a military junta headed by General Yahya Khan. In the East, Mujibur Rahman had been arrested and kept imprisoned since late 1966 on charges of treason; business and industrial ventures owned by firms based in the West were being subject to disruption and sabotage, at times in the form of armed revolt; and recourse to military operations for suppressing mass protests and labour unrest had become increasingly frequent.

Meanwhile, the Yahya Khan government, pledged to re-establish civilian rule in the country, set about the task of formulating guidelines for a new constitution. The constitution itself was expected to be drafted by a National Assembly formed on the basis of a country-wide election. Though the constitutional guidelines were announced in March 1970 yet another nine months were to elapse before the promised elections were held—the delay being caused by a series of natural disasters in East Pakistan.

The results of the National Assembly elections of December 1970 were an emphatic confirmation of the fact that Pakistan was a single political entity only in name. In East Pakistan, the *Awami* League won 160 out of the 162 seats, having secured 75% of the popular vote.[22] In West Pakistan, the victory of the Pakistan People's Party led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was almost equally impressive. It won 81 out of the total of 138 National Assembly seats allocated to that part of the country, which

included 80 out of the total of 109 seats of Punjab and Sind, Pakistan's foremost centres of economic and political power. Of very special significance to the subsequent course of events was the fact that the *Awami* League, with its 160 seats, had come to command an absolute majority in the total of 300 in the National Assembly.

The National Assembly never undertook the task of drafting a constitution and, indeed, never met, due mainly to the intransigence of its two main parties. The *Awami* League, on the one hand, insisted on the strict adherence to the principles enunciated in its 'Six-Point Demand.' On the other, Bhutto was equally adamant in the assertion that his party, having received an overwhelming mandate from the people of West Pakistan, could neither perform an oppositional role in a National Assembly nor agree to a constitutional arrangement which violates the principle of territorial integrity of Pakistan. All attempts to initiate a process of negotiation, including those that took the form of intimidatory pressures brought to bear upon the *Awami* League by the military strongman Yahya Khan, failed to end the stalemate.

At the end of February 1971, Yahya Khan, apparently with the approval of Bhutto, initiated military action towards suppressing the oppositional forces of East Pakistan. The army operations took the form of suspension of all civil rights, arrest and imprisonment of many in the *Awami* League leadership, and the use of excessive force not merely against those engaged in violence but even on politically active but non-violent groups that were believed to constitute the *Awami* League support base. The military crackdown prompted a decisive response from Mujibur Rahman who, on 7 March, announced, for the first time, that the *Awami* League was now engaged in a struggle for independence from Pakistan. He also launched a *hartal*—a campaign of non-cooperation—involving a total stoppage of work in urban areas and protest demonstrations accompanied by sporadic violence targeted at those identified as collaborators with West Pakistan. These included many higher level employees of the state sector and certain non-Bengali ethnic minorities such as the Urdu-speaking Biharis who had migrated to East Pakistan at the time of the partition. An announcement was made by a 'provisional government in exile' from its base in India that Mujibur Rahman is the president of the nation state of Bangladesh.

As the intensity of the conflict heightened—the eventual death-toll has been estimated at about 1.5 million[23]—and the army offensive becoming increasingly brutal, many thousands of youth—trade union activists, university students and the unemployed—joined the ranks of the insurgents loosely organised as a 'liberation army'—*Mukthi Bahini*—the core of which consisted of several units of Bengali troops formerly of the

regular Pakistan army.[24] The *Mukthi Bahini* is believed to have received clandestine support in the form of training and weaponry from India over several years in the period leading up to the crisis. In the latter part of 1971, central government power in East Pakistan was largely confined to some of its principal urban areas over which the army had regained a measure of control. It was at this stage that the long-expected Indian military intervention, delayed thus far mainly by uncertainties regarding international reactions, was launched. Following a series of preliminary border skirmishes with Pakistan troops, the Indian army incursions into East Pakistan began on 21 November, and, with the assistance of the *Mukthi Bahini*, made rapid headway against largely ineffective resistance. Faced against overwhelming odds, Pakistani military units in East Pakistan formally surrendered to the Indian army on 19 December 1971.

Towards National Consolidation

At the completion of the 'war of liberation,' Yahya Khan was deposed, and the reins of government in West Pakistan passed on to the hands of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who, in turn, released Mujibur Rahman from prison and facilitated his return to Bangladesh. Mujibur arrived in Dhaka on 10 January 1972, assumed office as Prime Minister of the new state, and piloted a constitution through a constituent assembly consisting of persons who had won their respective constituencies in East Pakistan at the elections of December 1970. The withdrawal of the Indian army from Bangladesh had been completed by the end of March 1972. The landslide victory recorded by the *Awami* League at the national elections held in early 1973, winning 305 out of the total of 315 parliamentary seats, provided confirmation of the massive popular support which Mujibur Rahman and his party still enjoyed. In February 1974, Pakistan gave formal recognition to the independent status of Bangladesh, and seven months later Bangladesh was admitted to membership of the United Nations.

The constitution promulgated in 1972 was evidently based on a political doctrine that had come to be known as 'Mujibism,' comprising the principles of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism.[25] It provided for a unitary system of government headed by a prime minister, a multi-party polity, and a legislature elected on the basis of universal adult franchise. It ensured the independence of the judiciary and provided safeguards to fundamental human rights. Though Bengali was made the national language, the formal adoption of the term 'Bangladeshi' in preference to 'Bengali' as the official designation of the people was

intended to signify that, constitutionally, territory rather than language or religion is the basic ingredient of national identity.

An important feature of the constitution of 1972 was that it extended the direct authority of the central government to the hilly area of the south-east which, since 1900, had been governed under a special administrative and legal arrangement known as the 'Hill Tracts Regulations.' In the present context, the related constitutional provisions could be seen as representing a measure intended to integrate the tribal groups living in this area with the rest of the nation, to draw into the national economic matrix an area that had remained throughout in the periphery of central control, and to consolidate the territorial demarcation of Bangladesh in a zone over which the international frontiers with India and Burma had always been hazy. The results of this attempt deviated from expectations, and as a later section of this article shows, the promulgation of the constitution of 1972 marked a critical stage in an aspect of on-going armed conflict in Bangladesh—namely, that concerning the hill-tribes of the Chittagong area.

That the population of Bangladesh at the time of its birth had substantially greater ethnic homogeneity than East Pakistan during its early period of existence (Table 6) was a special advantage from the viewpoint of national integration. The drop in the Hindu share of the population of this area from about 24% at the time of the partition in 1947 to about 13% recorded at the first population census of Bangladesh conducted in 1974 was, according to Maniruzzaman,[26] largely a result of their migration to India throughout the 1950s and the 60s, a process which accelerated sharply during the turbulences of the early 1970s. Moreover, the large-scale exodus of Urdu-speaking Muslims during the liberation war meant that, by 1974, Bengali (or Bangla as it was being referred to) was the mother tongue for almost 98% of the Bangladeshi population.

Table 6
Linguistic and Religious Composition of the Population of Bangladesh

Linguistic Groups		Religious Groups	
Bengali	97.7	Muslim	86.6
Bihari	1.3	Hindu	12.1
Tribal	0.9	Buddhist	0.6
Other	0.1	Christian	0.3
		Other	0.4

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica

The Tribal Population of Bangladesh

TRIBE	*NUMBER*	*MAIN RELIGION*
Chittagong Hill Tracts		
Chakma	252,858	Buddhists
Marma	157,301	Buddhists
Tripurs *	81,014	Hindu
Mrong	22,178	Buddhists
Tanchangya **	21,639	Buddhists
Bawm	13,471	Christian
Pankha	3,227	Christian
Khyang	2,343	Buddhists
Sak	2,127	Buddhist
Khami	1,241	Hindu
Lushai	662	Christian
Mro	126	Buddhist
Other parts of Bangladesh		
Santal	202,162	
Garo (Mandi)	64,280	
Manipuri	24,882	
Koch	16,567	
Khasi	12,280	
Hajong	11,540	
Other tribes	316,080	

Notes: * includes sub-groups Uchais and Riangs
** sometimes considered a branch of Chakma
Principal source: Panday and Thiagarajah, 1996.[27]

CONFLICT SITUATIONS: EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Indo-Bangladeshi Relations

During the 'Pakistan Period' of the history of Bangladesh, armed conflict within Bangladeshi territory attributable to foreign relations is represented by a few minor episodes of violence along the international boundary with India. Small areas adjacent to the Indo-East Pakistani border defined in 1947 constituted 'enclaves' which intrude into each other's territory and caused occasional clashes between frontier troops. The most serious among such clashes occurred in late 1970 in the Batrigach enclave extending into the Cooch-Behar district of West Bengal.[28] The only other form of friction with India during this period which had connotations of

armed conflict was that the Islamabad government had permitted the use of East Pakistani territory for camps conducted by China to provide military training to anti-Indian guerrilla groups of the Naga and Mizo tribes in north-east India.

From the perspectives of a study of conflict, the friendly relations which the *Awami* League leaders had with India at the time of the birth of Bangladesh could have been considered as enhancing the prospects of the new nation for harmonious external relations. The mutual goodwill between New Delhi and Dhaka at this time stemmed from several sources, one of which was the prevailing belief among the policy makers in both countries that, from the viewpoint of recent history, their disputes and divergences of interests were by-products of the hostile relations that had persisted between India and Pakistan. The continuing undercurrents of Hindu-Muslim rivalry in the sub-continent notwithstanding, it had become evident by this stage that India was not a threat to the survival of Bangladesh, but that Indian policy delineations throughout the past in regard to most of the unresolved disputes that directly concerned the people of Bangladesh had been shaped by the broader considerations that had guided Indo-Pakistani relations - namely, the dispute over Kashmir, cross-border irredentism, the basically different positions maintained by the two countries in most foreign policy and regional issues, and, more generally, the deep-seated distrust of each other's motives and objectives.

In the period leading up to the liberation of Bangladesh, the disapproval of the *Awami* League of certain provocative acts of the Pakistani government against India, and the secularism advocated by Mujibur Rahman in religion-state relationships, also appeared to contribute towards strengthening of the ties between the two countries. Apart from all these, there were the obligations which arose from the fact that Indian military intervention was the most decisive factor in the successful conclusion of the liberation war. The 'Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Cooperation, Friendship and Peace' signed in March 1972 appeared at that time to be the culmination of the mutual trust that had developed between the leaders of the two governments.

It soon became apparent, however, that Indo-Bangladeshi harmony symbolised by the treaty could neither withstand the pressures of their divergent interests nor overcome the deep-seated animosities of the past. The treaty failed to produce the results anticipated by the leaders of both countries. On the one hand, Indira Gandhi expected from Bangladesh, policy delineations that would serve India's aspirations for regional super-power status. An independent state, located as it is adjacent to the politically volatile tribal areas of the north-east, if remaining pliant to Indian interests, was also expected to serve as a source of strength to

India's national security. On the other hand, Mujibur Rahman, though declaring his intention of pursuing an independent foreign policy (involving, among other things, close ties with China), nevertheless expected from India, generous concessions towards the resolution of outstanding disputes. Both these conflicting sets of expectations remained unfulfilled, resulting in a trajectory of deteriorating relationships between the two countries within a remarkably short time-span.

Ziaur Rahman's regime, established over Bangladesh in the late 1970s, was featured by a vigorous foreign policy offensive aimed at forging links between Bangladesh and other nations including those such as Pakistan and China with whom India's relations were not close and cordial. For example, early in his tenure, Zia entered into trade agreements with Islamabad and Beijing, canvassed support among the leaders of these countries and those of the Islamic world for the cause of Bangladesh in certain disputes it had with India, and veered towards the West in issues concerning global power politics. Yet, ironically enough, it was during the Zia government that the frigid Indo-Bangladeshi relations began to thaw. In a series of moves which included the signing of agreements on trade, technical cooperation and the thorny issues of the Farakka barrage and cross-border guerrilla movements (to be discussed presently), the *Janatha* government under Moraji Desai sought to counteract the growing international sympathy towards Bangladesh in the unresolved disputes between the two countries. In the 1980s, Bangladesh under Mohammad Ershad, and India under Indira Gandhi, and later under Rajiv Gandhi, continued to maintain the same mutual foreign policy stances, despite the recurrence of friction over specific issues

In the internal politics of Bangladesh, however, India often tends to be portrayed as a hostile neighbour, especially by those in opposition to the regime at any point of time. The notion that India is domineering in its attitude towards Bangladesh is evidently widespread enough for the 'India Factor' to figure prominently in electoral politics.[29] Critics, while not entirely discounting the substance of this perception, also see in it a deep-seated prejudice based on past rivalries.[30]

As a preliminary note to the examination of specific disputes between Bangladesh and India in the sections that follow, it is necessary to stress that such disputes are unlikely to produce large-scale military confrontations, and that, while they possess the potential of aggravating the problems of the two countries and thus contribute to instability and unrest, they will remain relatively insignificant as situations of armed conflict in South Asia.

The River Water Dispute

The Indo-Bangladeshi dispute concerning the utilisation of water in the lower reaches of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna river catchments is a classic example of a problem between lower riparian and upper riparian states, the solutions to which have remained elusive on account of their inability or unwillingness to compromise on conflicting economic and political needs as perceived at their respective decision-making levels. The geographical perspectives of this problem may be outlined with reference to several basic facts.

(a) Approximately 80% of the total area of Bangladesh falls within the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta, a flat alluvial plain only the northern fringe of which rises to an elevation of above 100 meters. This area is traversed by about 700 rivers and rivulets which constitute a dense and intricate network of surface drainage.

(b) The deltaic plain is subject to recurrent floods which usually occur during the Summer monsoon when, even in an year during which climatic conditions do not deviate markedly from the norms, river discharge inundates about 20% of the land. Floods that extend over more than 40% of the land have been recorded on at least eight occasions during the past 25 years.

(c) Rainfall and river discharge in the delta region varies seasonally resulting in deficiencies of water for agriculture usually during the first five months of the year. Hence, in most parts of the delta, multiple cropping necessitates the intensive use of the river water for irrigation. The rivers of the delta are also important for navigation, fresh water fisheries, prevention of salinisation, and the preservation of aquatic ecosystems.

(d) The average annual river discharge over Bangladesh has been estimated at 148 million ha/m. Of this total, Brahmaputra, Ganga and Meghna account for 139 million ha/m (70 million, 55 million and 14 million ha/m, respectively). These rivers enter Bangladesh from Indian territory. Thus, their utilisation up-stream affects the hydrology of Bangladesh.

(e) The demand for Ganga water on the Indian side of the catchment is as intense as it is in Bangladesh. The river flow is inadequate to meet current and projected demands of both countries. In contrast, a large part of water carried by the Brahmaputra will continue to remain un-utilised.

The history of the water dispute in this area could be traced back to the official communications between the governments of India and Pakistan in 1951 on the subject of utilisation of the deltaic water.[31] Thereafter, during the 1950s, there were several tentative but futile proposals by both governments for collaboration in hydraulic planning in the Ganga delta. Meanwhile, the government of India prepared plans for the construction of a barrage along the Ganga at Farakka (approximately 14 km above the point at which the river becomes a part of the Indo-East Pakistani boundary) for the purpose of diverting water into the Baghirarthi-Hoogly basin on the Indian side of the border.

The Farakka barrage, unlike other hydraulic projects undertaken in India during the 1950s and the 60s, was not intended to serve irrigation needs. Its main purpose was that of establishing a 'natural' process of de-silting the Hoogly river bed along which the port of Calcutta is located, and thus checking the declining navigational 'draft' of the port. Since mechanical dredging was evidently ineffective against natural siltation, flushing out the silt by augmenting the Hoogly flow with water diverted at Farakka was believed to be the only feasible means of preserving Calcutta's status as a major port city.

India's decision to proceed with the Farakka project, formally announced in 1960, evoked sustained protest from Pakistan. It has been alleged that, to the Pakistani government, the project became a key issue of anti-Indian propaganda, and that bilateral negotiations on the Farakka project failed mainly due a desire on its part to perpetuate an East Pakistani grievance against India. However, as Verghese has shown in vivid detail,[32] there were other more tangible causes for the failure of such negotiations, which may be summarised as follows:

(a) There was continuing disagreement on the volume of water which needs to be diverted at Farakka to meet the navigational and other requirements of Calcutta. The Indian position was that the required minimum was 40,000 cusec throughout the year which, as a sacrifice towards meeting the dry season water needs of the lower riparian, may be reduced to 20,000 cusec over the low water flow period from mid-March to mid-May.

(b) The negotiators from Pakistan challenged the Indian claims on technical, ecological and economic grounds. At the early stages of negotiation, the technical feasibility of the project objective—de-silting the Hoogly river bed—was subject to dispute. At later stages, in the face of evidence that flushing out the silt was, indeed, feasible, the main technical objection turned to a claim that the Indian water demand from Farakka for de-silting purposes was excessive. The

other objections to the project from the Pakistani viewpoint were that it would create water scarcities for present and future irrigation needs of the delta region, cause salinisation in low-lying areas through sea-water infiltration, and destroy the palustrine ecosystems along the marine fringe of the delta—the *Sundarbans*.

(c) The intergovernmental negotiations, it appears, were not conducted in an atmosphere of mutual trust. India, for example, persistently refused to release either information on its other large-scale irrigation projects in the upper Ganga basin or hydrological data accumulated through actual and simulated experimental trials. A proposal to include Nepal in the negotiations, or suggestions on alternative methods of enhancing the Hoogly flow were also unacceptable to India. By the late 1960s, construction work at Farakka had begun, and all indications were that the main features of the project were no longer negotiable.

Over a brief spell after Bangladesh attained independence there was some hope that an acceptable water sharing arrangement could be worked out through the 'Indo-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission' (JRC) established as a sequel to the 'friendship treaty' of March 1972. By this stage, the main issue in dispute related to the volume of water to be diverted at Farakka. Despite prolonged negotiation, the Bangladeshi demand that any diversion of water should ensure the down-stream flow along the Ganga of a minimum of 40,000 cusec out of the total availability of 55,000 cusec, (estimated at 75% mean expectancy) during the dry months continued to be rejected by India.[33] The resulting resentment, as already noted, was one of the main causes for the mounting hostility towards India in Bangladesh witnessed in the mid-1970s.

The Farakka barrage came into operation in April 1975 with the commencement of a trial diversion during which the related effects were monitored. The impact assessments reported by Bangladesh pointed to both immediate losses as well as severe potential damage. Maintaining that the Bangladeshi claims in this regard were exaggerated, India continued to operate the barrage with no agreement being reached on the specifics of water sharing. According to independent expert opinion[34] it soon became apparent that the diversion of the Ganga water at Farakka was, indeed, harmful to Bangladesh, though the actual extent of harm could not be estimated in quantified and indisputable form. India's unilateral decision-making in regard to water diversion at Farakka during these years contributed to widespread resentment in Bangladesh, and a popular feeling especially among those affected by seasonal scarcity of

water that India is deliberately undermining the economy of its pauperised neighbour struggling for survival.

A 'Water Sharing Agreement' between India and Bangladesh, valid initially over a three-year period, and containing certain conditional concessions to Bangladesh, was eventually worked out in November 1977. It represented an aspect of the improvement of bilateral relations under the *Janatha* Party government of India and Ziaur Rahman's military regime of Bangladesh. The concessions, though falling short of Bangladeshi claims relating to its water needs, reduced the element of uncertainty that had prevailed earlier in regard to dry season water supply in those parts of the delta dependent on the flow along the main Ganga distributory (the Padma).

The agreement also marked an important new development in the attention it devoted to the study of possibilities of enhancing the river flow along the Ganga to a level which would be adequate to meet the needs of both countries. Several tentative proposals formulated on the basis of such thinking—diverting water to the Ganga from other river basins, construction of a series of high dams for storage and regulation of water flow in the upper Ganga catchment—had been in existence earlier. The change represented by the 1977 agreement was that it made formal provision for undertaking related feasibility studies. Implicit in this component of the agreement was an indication by India that the allocation of water to Bangladesh will depend, in the long-run, on the development of infrastructure to augment the supply at Farakka.

Among the 'augmentation' proposals developed and presented for formal consideration, an Indian plan which envisaged the diversion of water from Brahmaputra to the Ganga appears to have been backed by more technical detail than the others. The plan envisaged the construction of a barrage across the Brahmaputra river at Jogighopa in Assam from which water would be conveyed along a 324 km transbasin canal (of which 125 km would traverse Bangladeshi territory) to the Ganga at a point above Farakka (Figure 1). The proposed canal, according to the plan, will add substantially to the volume of water available at Farakka, irrigate a large extent of land in Bangladesh and India, reduce floods, and serve as a water-way between West Bengal and Assam. Despite its attractiveness as an exercise in integrated harnessing of the Ganga-Brahmaputra rivers, the plan was obviously unacceptable to Bangladesh from whose viewpoint its implementation would result in the control of about 70% of the entire river water supply of the country from two key hydraulic structures—Farakka and Jogighopa—both located in Indian territory. From ecological perspectives, the proposed canal design—an engineering marvel of almost unprecedented dimensions—was seen as

representing a risky leap into the unknown. The Indian plan was also objected to on many other grounds such as its possible adverse effects on areas being fed by the Brahmaputra, losses of arable land and the relocation of people which the construction of the canal would entail, the bifurcation of the country by a large water-way, and the enormous capital outlay required for implementing the plan.

The main Bangladeshi 'augmentation' proposal was based on the principle that the two major river basins of the region should be treated as separate units in hydrological planning, and that solutions to the Farakka problem should be sought within the confines of the Ganga basin. It also had an underlying assumption, which proved to be groundless,[35] that Nepal could be persuaded to permit the construction of some of its main hydraulic structures along Ganga's Himalayan tributaries. The plan foundered in the face of Nepal's unwillingness to collaborate, and India's assertion that it was replete with both technical errors as well as unrealistic assumptions.

Despite this deadlock on 'augmentation,' the 'Water Sharing Agreement' of 1977, after its lapse at the end of the three-year period, was extended from time to time with minor modifications through 'memoranda of understanding' signed by the two governments. A recurrent feature of the related negotiations was the Indian insistence on linking the subject of water releases at Farakka during the critical dry months to the matter of reaching consensus on the Indian augmentation proposal. Since there continued to be intense opposition to the latter from Bangladesh, the government of India in 1988 abandoned the practice of arriving at *ad hoc* extensions of working out the water sharing agreement. The drought suffered by Bangladesh in 1987 and the devastation of a large part of the country by floods in the following year made the timing of this move appear particularly harsh and insensitive, resulting in Indo-Bangladeshi relations during the late 1980s once again reaching a low ebb. Proposals for compromise from various quarters failed to end the impasse until 1992 when, as a result of fresh negotiations between the prime ministers of the two countries, institutional mechanisms for working out the modalities of short-term 'water sharing' and long-term 'augmentation' were re-established.[36] While uncertainties regarding the former objective have been largely eliminated through an Indo-Bangladesh agreement forged in 1997, the headway hitherto made towards achieving the latter seems intangible.

The river water dispute in Bengal has never taken the form of an armed conflict. Its salience to a study focussed on violent conflict could be seen mainly in its direct and indirect impact on other more volatile bilateral issues. It hardened attitudes and generated mutual mistrust

between political leaders and the intelligentsia of the two countries. It has contributed to the perpetuation of poverty especially among the peasantry of Bangladesh, and thus to internal political unrest which has often taken militant forms. Considered against the backdrop of other Indo-Bangladeshi disputes, the proposed Indian 'augmentation' plan, if implemented, has the potential of creating a situation of major international armed conflict.

The river water problem is still only partially resolved. It would, indeed, be simplistic to attribute this, as critics have often done, to Indian intransigence or irrational suspicion on the part of Bangladesh. The constraints acting upon the formulation of a solution are, in fact, highly complex. As one could easily appreciate, domestic politics in both countries have always had a profound impact on the conflicting stances taken at bilateral negotiations. For example, The Bangladeshi perception that one of the main objectives of the Farakka project was that of increasing India's political leverage in Indo-Bangladesh dealings is not entirely devoid of sound reasoning.[37] India's stand in many instances could similarly be explained with reference to the fact that a concession made by New Delhi invariably evokes a hostile reaction from the opposition parties in *Lok Sabha* and from the state government of West Bengal which sees the water needs of the city of Calcutta and its hinterland as intense as they are of Bangladesh. Again, with past experiences, notably those of the Mujibur Rahman era, the leaders in Dhaka have also been acutely conscious of the adverse electoral repercussions of even the semblance of a compromise with India. Moreover, the perpetuation of the image of a powerful neighbour constantly undermining Bangladeshi interests has served the purpose of diverting attention from other causes for economic failures. At a more general plane, the history of the river water dispute also illustrates the fact that in a situation where conflicting interests of short-term survival are at stake, long-term considerations tend to become almost inconsequential to decision-making.

Migration Across the Indo-Bangladesh Border

The land frontier which Bangladesh shares with its neighbours is bordered by Indian territory for a distance of 2,400 km and by Myanmar (Burma) for 200 km. Being one of the most pervious international frontiers in the world, over long stretches, especially in its eastern and north-eastern parts, it has seldom served as an effective barrier to the movement of people. Even where restrictions to such movements exist, barriers have been lifted under the pressures of mass migration in times of political turmoil.

Excluding cross-border movements which could be regarded as casual "commuting" over short distances and those that involve smuggling of goods, an estimated 15 to 20 million people may be said to have crossed the border from either side on a more permanent basis during the past fifty years. Of this total the large majority is accounted for by mass migrations of political refugees which accompanied the partition in 1947 and the liberation war of 1971. Counter-insurgency military operations undertaken in the tribal areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the mid-1970s are reported to have resulted in another comparatively smaller tide of out-migration from Bangladesh to the Indian states of Tripura and Mizoram. Its overall numerical scale could be placed at about 400,000. In this category of 'political refugees' one could also include those who have constituted the persistent trickles of migrants to and from Bangladesh which are attributable to feelings of insecurity generated by low-key ethnic tensions in their respective source areas. In addition, there have been emigrations from Bangladesh that have been induced largely by economic causes. These movements of 'economic refugees' consist of Bangladeshi migrants into India in search of livelihood mostly as urban workers; and to a lesser extent in terms of numbers, the migration of people made destitute by natural disasters in Bangladesh.

The more important waves of migration referred to above were the direct outcome of armed conflict under exceptional conditions which prevailed in the past. The massive Hindu-Muslim-Sikh relocations of population in the sub-continent during the late 1940s, for example, constituted an episode of history which is unlikely to recur, and could, in retrospect, be considered as a demographic transformation which has, in the long-run, had the effect of reducing the potential for militant conflict between these three religious groups in their source areas, while creating the basis for sub-national inter-group conflict in their new countries of domicile. Where refugees settled down in large numbers as in Calcutta, there has been a tendency among them to preserve their distinctiveness from the local people. For example, according to Asok Mitra,[38] "There is plenty of evidence that the first rush of migrants from East Bengal during 1947-52 concentrated for obvious reasons in Calcutta and Howrah city proper, but large numbers of refugees felt compelled to leave this core area for the peripheral and non-municipal areas, in order to preserve a semblance of their former life style." The situation that developed in East Pakistan with the arrival of Urdu-speaking Muslim migrants from West Bengal and Bihar at the time of the partition (to which reference has been made earlier) could be cited as a further illustration of this phenomenon.

Subject to certain qualifications, the same generalisation would apply to those among the East Pakistani refugees of the liberation war who

became permanent residents of India. In the wake of the Pakistani military offensive in its eastern 'wing' in early 1971, millions of East Pakistani people fled to the adjacent Indian states where a large proportion among them were accommodated in refugee camps. The refugee destinations were themselves politically unstable.[39] In West Bengal, placed under direct 'presidential rule' from April that year, the Congress government in Delhi was facing stiff extra-parliamentary opposition from the Communist Party-Marxists (CPM) and the Naxalites. In Tripura and Meghalaya, the problems caused by the refugees (outnumbering the local population in certain parts by the end of the year) were even more acute. Though most of these refugees were repatriated to Bangladesh at the end of the war, an unknown number consisting largely of Hindus, are believed to have made India their home, either as urban workers swelling the existing slum population of the cities or as settlers in government-sponsored 'colonisation schemes.' On conflict situations associated with the latter process, Farmer has observed[40] that, especially where the schemes are located within or in proximity to tribal homelands, there have been instances when "fires of resentment have occasionally burst into flame."

As a dispute in foreign relations, the movement of people across the Indo-Bangladeshi border in the north-east emerged into prominence in 1974 when the government of Bangladesh initiated an offensive against the guerrilla groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). It persisted throughout the 1980s effectively unchecked, providing grounds for an accusation that India was assisting the rebels and providing them shelter. The implication of this charge was that India was employing subversive military means to destabilise Bangladesh by prolonging the tribal rebellion in the CHT area.

Yet another episode of politically induced cross-border migration occurred in 1979 when, as a result of an outburst of Hindu-Muslim clashes in West Bengal, an estimated 20,000 Muslims fled to the Kushita District of Bangladesh. Though these refugees were made to return to India after the restoration of order, the riots were a clear indication of the persistence of communal tensions in the areas adjacent to the Indo-Bangladeshi border.

The long-term net effect of migration across the Indo-Bangladeshi border is that there is at present within Indian territory a large number of people who are regarded as aliens from Bangladesh. As one could expect, perceptions on the legitimacy of their presence in India are highly varied, and depend on the ramified interactions of a large number of factors such as the cultural identity of the migrants in relation to the population in their areas of domicile, their impact on the local economy and on electoral politics, attitudes and notions propagated by parties and other political

groups in India, and the extent to which their presence violates Indian laws. On the cumulative impact of these interactions, one could generalise that it is the migrants from Bangladesh who are regarded as 'economic refugees' that have the lowest level of acceptance in India.

The number of Bangladeshi migrants who fall into this category is not known. Yet another important unknown is the proportion among them who could be classed as "illegal immigrants." What is known about them is that in certain areas—the states of the north-east, West Bengal, parts of Bihar, and the cities of Delhi, Calcutta and Mumbai—the tensions created by their presence have been important enough to become live issues in electoral politics. As Kaushal has shown,[41] the *Bharatiya Janatha* Party (which won the largest number of *Lok Sabha* seats at the elections of 1996) made a categorical pledge to deport the illegal immigrants living in India to Bangladesh, and to fortify the sections of the Indo-Bangladeshi frontier through which the migrants infiltrate into India. Other extremist Hindu political groups such as the *Shiv Sena* of Maharashtra have also advocated stern measures against the Bangladeshi immigrants and, in fact, engage in political propaganda that borders on incitement to violence. In the wider context of intensifying religious fundamentalism in the sub-continent, the dispute on 'economic refugees' from Bangladesh has become a prominent ingredient of Hindu-Muslim rivalry, one which has the potential of developing into outbursts of violence especially in some of the main urban areas of India.

Refugee Problem in the Bangladesh-Myanmar Border Area

The section of the Bangladesh frontier in the south-east runs adjacent to the northern Arakan states of Myanmar (formerly, Burma)—a politically turbulent area which has, at least from the late 1940s, been featured by spells of high intensity conflict between the government of Myanmar and the Arakanese Muslims—the 'Rohingya.' The length of time over which the Rohingya have coexisted in this hilly area with the numerically larger 'Rakhine'—a predominantly Buddhist ethnic group—is not known with certainty. The Rohingya claim in this regard is that their roots could be traced back to the 10th century Muslim migrations into Burma, and that in northern Arakan they constituted an independent principality for more than three centuries from 1430 to 1784.[42] This has been disputed. The official stand of the government of Myanmar (which has, in fact, been corroborated in certain scholarly writings) is that the Rohingya community consists largely of Bengali Muslims who migrated into this area after the annexation of Arakan by the British in 1843.

Regardless of the validity of one or the other of the foregoing assertions, there is hardly any doubt that, under British rule, the Rohingya links with Islamic Bengal remained more tangible than their links with the core areas of Buddhist Burma in the Irrawaddy valley. For instance, in the period leading to the withdrawal of the British from South Asia, there was a demand for an independent political entity for the Arakanese Muslims. During this time, the leaders of this community also probed the possibility of incorporation with Pakistan to which the Muslim League gave nominal support.[43] In the wake of Myanmar's independence, the demand for an autonomous Muslim state in the Arakan took the form of an insurrection led by the Mujahiden—a rebel group committed to a 'holy war'—which was brought under a measure of control by the Myanmar government only in 1955. It has been claimed[44] that atrocities committed by the Mujahiden on the Arakanese Buddhists during this time resulted in a large-scale exodus of the latter group, and that the land thus left vacant attracted a considerable number of new Muslim migrants into this area from the adjacent parts of East Pakistan.

The suppression of the Mujahiden insurrection did not result in the complete elimination of Muslim militancy in northern Arakan. The so-called 'Rohingya Patriotic Front'—an umbrella organisation for small Muslim guerrilla groups which had at least nominal links with similar militant groups among other ethnic minorities in the peripheral areas of Myanmar—persisted with a 'resistance movement' against alleged discrimination and harassment by the government.[45] The situation deteriorated further after the overthrow of civilian rule in Myanmar in 1962. The emphasis placed by the new military regime on national integration meant that the restrictions placed upon the minority communities of the country became more stringent, and the strategies pursued in the maintenance of law and order more oppressive.

A critical stage in the escalating conflict in northern Arakan was reached in 1978 when the Ne Win government launched the so-called "Nagomin Programme" which has been variously described as "a census operation,"[46] "a campaign against illegal immigrants,"[47] and "an attempt at national consolidation through forced eviction of the Muslims from Myanmar."[48] The writings available on this campaign suggest that it had all these elements, and that, as it gathered momentum, the Muslims living in northern Arakan were made the victims of extreme forms of hardship, brutality and terror. If, indeed, driving out the Muslims was one of its aims, the campaign achieved a high degree of success in that, by May 1978, an estimated 200,000 Rohingya had fled across the border to Bangladesh.

The Dhaka government, though reluctantly accommodating the refugees in camps located in proximity to the Myanmar border, categorically refuted the notion that the refugees were illegal immigrants from Bangladesh evicted from Myanmar. The magnitude of the crisis attracted the attention of international organisations such as the United Nations Commission for Refugees and other human rights NGOs which, while engaging in relief operations (the scope of which remained subject to stringent restrictions imposed by the governments of both Bangladesh and Myanmar), insisted on the principle that there should be no forced repatriation of political refugees across international frontiers. The Myanmar government, on the one hand, failed to restore conditions in the Arakan area which could facilitate the voluntary return of the refugees. It denied the Bangladeshi figures relating to refugee numbers. In official communiqués, it referred to the refugees as "armed bandits from Bengal," "rampaging Bengali mobs," and "wild Muslim extremists."[49] It also charged that the refugee camps located adjacent to the frontier were been used as guerrilla bases. On the other hand, the Bangladesh government, overburdened with its own problems, is also reported to have employed various coercive methods such as intimidation and physical harassment, and frugal rationing of food and other essentials, for inducing the refugees to return to Myanmar. There is some lack of clarity on the eventual outcome of these counteracting attempts. According to certain observers,[50] by the early 1980s, the large majority of refugees had returned to Myanmar. Others[51] have maintained that large numbers of Rohingya have continued to linger in refugee camps.

The conditions which those among the refugees who returned to Myanmar encountered were only marginally better than they were before the "Nagomin Programme," the improvement being largely confined to the reduced military presence in northern Arakan. This area, however, continued to suffer neglect and, as reported by several UN agencies,[52] living conditions in the predominantly Rohingya districts, as reflected in basic demographic and welfare indicators, were the worst in the country. The persistence of ethnic tension in the area was also evidenced by outbursts of Muslim-Buddhist clashes.[53]

In 1990, the Arakanese Muslims became the target of a second wave of military oppression which, according to Lintner,[54] was a "diversionary tactic" of the Myanmar government taken in the face of mounting popular pressures towards democratisation. The offensive was justified by the authorities with reference to an alleged resurgence of insurrectionary activities of the "Muslim extremists" in the north Arakan area. Its outcome was another large-scale out-flow of refugees to Bangladesh which, by March 1992, is reported to have aggregated to an estimated

270,000.[55] The government denied the alleged scale of the exodus, insisting that no more than a few thousands had fled the country, and also charged that the Bangladeshi government was providing covert support to armed insurgent groups especially by way of permitting both guerrilla attacks on Myanmar from Bangladeshi territory as well as recruitment of youth to guerrilla cadres in the refugee camps.

The intense hostility between Bangladesh and Myanmar featured by sabre-rattling from both sides of the frontier which prevailed during this period began to ease only in 1994 when bilateral negotiations lead to a phased-out return of the refugees to Myanmar, paralleled by measures adopted by the Dhaka government to curb the Rohingya rebel operations in the border areas of Bangladesh. Though an estimated 190,000 refugees are said to have returned to northern Arakan by the end of 1995, more recent reports indicate that the Bangladesh-Myanmar border zone has continued to remain an arena of tension and unrest.[56]

CONFLICT SITUATIONS: ETHNIC CONFLICT

Ethnicity and Conflict

Bangladesh is featured by greater religious and linguistic homogeneity than some of the other nation states of South Asia (Table 7). This has often been considered a comparative advantage. However, from the viewpoint of conflict, the diversities even among the people living in the deltaic plains of the country cannot be regarded unimportant. The presence of Indo-Bangladeshi religious and linguistic overlaps have figured prominently in both external as well as internal conflict. One of the obvious indications that the significance of ethnic homogeneity as an advantage could easily be overstated is that Hindus, despite their declining ratio, still account for about 12% of the population. Another is that those who consider Urdu as their mother tongue, though numbering less than a million, constitute the largest linguistic minority in the country.

Table 7
Majority Religious and Linguistic Groups in South Asian Countries (estimates for late 1980s)

	Percent of total population	
	Main religious group	Main linguistic group*
India	82.6 (Hinduism)	38.8 (Hindi)
Bangladesh	86.6 (Islam)	97.7 (Bangla)
Pakistan	96.7 (Islam)	48.2 (Punjabi)
Nepal	89.5 (Hinduism)	58.4 (Nepali)
Sri Lanka	69.2 (Buddhism)	74.0 (Sinhalese)
Bhutan	69.6 (Buddhism)	62.5 (Bhutia)
Maldives	100.0 (Islam)	n.a.

* enumerated on the basis of the 'first language' criterion

Despite continuing Muslim-Hindu rivalry with its ever-present potential for generating outbursts of militant conflict, and Bangla-Urdu disputes that had pronounced elements of violence in the past, it could be said that the more persistent ethnic conflict of contemporary Bangladesh is associated with the seemingly irreconcilable divergences of interests and aspirations between the Bengali-dominated political mainstream and the conglomerate of numerically small 'tribal groups' whose main concentrations are found in the so-called Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) - about 5,000 square miles of rugged and largely forested terrain in the south-eastern periphery of Bangladesh.

Origins of Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

At the time of the 1991 census of population, the CHT tribes consisted of 501,144 persons—that is 51% of the population of this area, and 0.5% of the total population of Bangladesh. The accuracy of these figures is subject to doubt. According to Rahim[57] the 'tribal' population of Bangladesh, which is concentrated in the CHT (Rangamati Region, as it has been named since 1986) and in the Mymensingh, Sylhet and Rajshahi regions, was 897,828 in 1981. Another recent writing which cites data from the census of 1991[58] states that the total tribal population at that time in Bangladesh was 1,205,978 of which the CHT tribes accounted for 558,187. Considered as being of Mongoloid stock, they are said to belong to about 14 different tribes among which the politically articulate and predominantly Buddhist Chakma tribe is the largest. The other largely Buddhist tribes are the Marma, Tripura, Mrong and Tanchangya. Christianity has spread mainly among the Lushai, Bawm and Pankha people. Animism has remained

fairly widespread. The ethnic identity of some of these tribes seem to lack clarity.

From the time of the initial extension of British rule into this part of the sub-continent in the mid-19th century, the CHT were permitted to retain a semi-autonomous status, with the colonial government confining itself, as it did in other peripheral areas of British India, to defense of the frontier zone of the *raj*, and the maintenance of law and order. The British formalised this arrangement through the so-called 'CHT Regulations' introduced in 1900 which provided for limited local self-government to the tribal groups and an almost total prohibition of immigration into the area. The resulting restriction of links with other parts on the sub-continent meant the preservation of the collective distinctiveness of the CHT tribes, in spite of the fact that the area had never been free of inter-tribal rivalries. It also meant the perpetuation of their relative backwardness and limitations in scope for spatial mobility.

With the approach of independence for a partitioned Indian sub-continent, the leadership of the CHT tribes, in which by this time the Chakma leaders formed the vanguard, demanded from the British a dispensation which would ensure the continuity of their autonomous status. It also negotiated with the leadership of the Indian Congress for securing a similar status within the Indian union. The British did not respond positively to the demand. The Congress leaders were also averse to a special political arrangement which would have made the CHT different from that of the tribal areas of the north-east (Mizoram, Tripura and Nagaland). The eventual outcome was that the Radcliffe Commission included the CHT within the territory of East Pakistan, thus granting the tribal people a status which they preferred least.

Marginalisation of the Chittagong Hill Tract Tribes

Soon after independence the government of Pakistan adopted various measures to consolidate its hold on the CHT and to draw the tribal people of the area into the national mainstream. Initially, these attempts did achieve a measure of success in the sense that a political party led by the principal spokesman of the Chakmas contested the elections held in 1954 and secured two seats in the legislative assembly of East Pakistan. What prevented this success of the attempts at integration from becoming a continuing trend was the encroachment of the CHT by the land-hungry peasantry from the adjacent lowlands of East Pakistan and the influx of traders, administrators and personnel from the armed forces into the area. This demographic change had the backing of the Pakistan government

which also embarked upon a programme of industrial development involving, among other things, the construction of a high capacity hydro-power project on the upper reaches of the Karnaphuli river located well within the tribal homeland, and several large-scale industrial enterprises in areas bordering the CHT. While the latter brought no tangible benefits to the tribal people in the form of employment and income, the overall damage caused by these changes to their interests was enormous. Apart from the cultural invasion represented by the immigration of outsiders into the CHT, there developed in the area a social stratification in which the tribal people were pushed into the less privileged strata. Moreover, these transformations also meant a drastic reduction in the physical resources at the disposal of the tribes. It has been estimated, for example, that the Karnaphuli reservoir alone resulted in the loss of about 50,000 acres of land belonging to the tribal people, displacement of nearly 100,000 persons (90% of whom were of the Chakma tribe), and the emigration of about 40,000 destitute Chakmas to the neighbouring Indian states of Tripura and Assam.

The growing discontent and indignation of the tribes paved the way for a build-up of ethnic tension in the CHT. Among the manifestations of this was the launching of a movement by a group of educated tribal youth which is said to have represented "a new wave of Chakma and Marma political identity and consciousness," and an increase in the incidence of violence targeted at the migrants, for which organised groups, including those with Marxist leanings, were believed to be responsible. The government response to these took the form of a constitutional amendment in 1964 that had the effect of legalising the migration of outsiders into the CHT area, and an enhancement of the capacity of law enforcement agencies (including the military) to counteract the resistance to such migration.

In the context of deteriorating relations between the tribal people and the Bengali immigrants in the CHT, the former were either indifferent or divided in their loyalties in relation to the political movements of the late 1960s which culminated in the creation of Bangladesh. There was, on the one hand, traces of support from the CHT tribes to the liberation struggle. These mainly took the form of several hundreds drawn from the more socially mobile segments of the tribal communities joining the ranks of the *Mukthi Bahini*, and a few political leaders of the Chakmas collaborating with the *Awami* League. As against this, in a somewhat more pronounced manner, there was non-cooperation and outright opposition. It has, in fact, been shown[59] that at least one traditional Chakma chief and several other political spokesmen for the tribes sided with Pakistan, and that about 3,000 persons from the CHT tribes were recruited into the pro-

Pakistan militia during Islamabad's offensive of 1971. These developments apart, the final stages of the *Mukthi Bahini* and Indian army counter-offensive against the Pakistani troops also involved operations in which the CHT tribes became victims of harsh treatment.

Armed Insurrection in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

The liberation war in its overall impact failed to create conditions for improved relationships between the new government of Bangladesh and the CHT tribes. Indeed, it appears in retrospect that the birth of Bangladesh marked the onset of a prolonged phase of heightened conflict in the CHT during which, however, the intensity of violence, the strength of organised tribal insurrection, and nature of the government's efforts at suppression or pacification, have varied from time to time.

In the formative stages of the new regime, concerted efforts were made by tribal leaders who had remained loyal to the *Awami* League during the liberation war to obtain constitutional provision for semi-autonomous status to the CHT. At the forefront of the representation of tribal interests was the *Jana Sanghati Samiti* (JSS), an officially recognised political party founded in March 1972 and headed by Manabendra Narayan Larma who had been a radical activist of the CHT since the mid-1960s and an elected representative of the East Pakistan provincial assembly since 1971. These efforts proved to be futile; and it soon became evident that, quite apart from the unwillingness of the *Awami* government to grant such constitutional concessions, it had made "total integration of the tribal areas" part and parcel of national development policy. Soon after the promulgation of the Bangladeshi constitution in November 1972, the JSS formed a militant wing, the *Shanti Bahini*, which, from about the middle of 1973, began to provide leadership to an armed insurrection in the CHT.

A critical evaluation of the divergences of interests inherent to the tribal problem at this time should necessarily stress that the motive force for the government's persistence with the policy of integrating the CHT was not merely a desire to establish state sovereignty over peripheral territory or subjugate an ethnic minority. It was, in fact, driven largely by dire economic need. Even in the early 1970s, by which time a considerable movement of the plains' people into the tribal area had already occurred, the CHT, with an average population density of less than 50 per square kilometer (compared to the Bangladeshi average of over 500), was the only part of the country that had large tracts of land lying idle or under-utilised in agriculture, and the only part with a physical base for hydro-power development. In contrast, both in lowland Chittagong itself, and in the

adjacent flood-prone rural areas of Comilla, Noakhali and Dhaka to the west, the scope for alleviating land-hunger was virtually non-existent. It could, of course, be argued that the CHT did not possess the capacity to absorb an immigrant population at a scale which would have a discernible impact on the intense agrarian pressures of the deltaic plain. Yet, placed in wider context, it does appear that the CHT did offer a range of possibilities which could not have been written off purely for the pacification of the tribal minorities whose aspirations were also seen to lack clarity and cohesion.

From the viewpoint of the tribal people in the CHT, the shift of state power to Dhaka in 1972 brought about a fundamental change in the contours of the conflict. In earlier times, especially during the military regimes of the 1960s, the foremost preoccupation of the government in relation to this issue was that of achieving a measure of stability in a sensitive border area of East Pakistan through curtailment of friction between the Bengali Muslims (who themselves were engaged in a movement towards self-rule) and the CHT tribes. In any event, to the rulers of Pakistan throughout the pre-liberation period, the CHT dispute was far less important than the other geopolitical concerns of the country. With the establishment of the state of Bangladesh, there was, on the one hand, an enhancement of the relative importance of the CHT dispute as a national issue and, on the other, an almost total coalescence of interests between the migrants into the tribal areas and the state.

In late 1973 the Mujibur Rahman government announced its intention of launching a large-scale programme of land distribution in the CHT. This prompted the *JSS/Shanti Bahini* to intensify its insurrection, engaging in acts of sabotage and disruption, extortion and plunder, attacks on migrant settlements, and the assassination of "moderate" tribal leaders who were opposed to armed revolt and/or identified as collaborators of the government. The government, in turn, increased the intensity of its counter-insurgency operations. Apart from the more concerted military confrontations with the rebels which this involved, there were, allegedly, many summary executions of rebel suspects, attacks on tribal communities believed to be providing assistance to the *Shanti Bahini*, and the forced relocation of tribal settlements. As in other conflict situations of this type, there were the mutual accusations of the commission of atrocities, invariably denied by those so charged, but (depending on specific circumstances) authenticated by eye-witness accounts and in reports prepared by observers from outside which are themselves not entirely free of bias. The faint signs that surfaced in 1975 of the possibility of working out a cease-fire disappeared with the death of Mujibur Rahman in August that year.

In general, the policies pursued by the military rulers of Bangladesh from the mid-1970s to 1991 in relation to the CHT could be described as persistence with earlier policy with somewhat greater room for manoeuvre, and stronger military backing. Ziaur Rahman rejected the tribal autonomy demand, and strengthened the anti-insurgent operations. At the same time, being unencumbered by considerations of electoral politics, he attempted to pacify the tribal people through a special programme of development under the so-called 'Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board' (CHTDB). With the same objective of pacification, he adopted a series of measures in the field of education which could be described as 'affirmative action' in favour of tribal youth. Against the backdrop of these reconciliation efforts, he launched in 1979 a settlement programme which had an initial target of settling 100,000 migrant families in the CHT during a five-year period (and a longer term expectation of distributing CHT land among 500,000 migrant families), and followed it up with an initiative—the first of its kind since 1975—for negotiations with the insurgents.

Husain Mohammad Ershad who took over the reins of government in March 1982 continued for several years with earlier policy relating to suppression of the insurgency and development of settlements in the CHT, while at the same time making overtures to the tribal people in the form of an amnesty to the insurgents, offers of limited administrative autonomy to the tribal areas, and an increase of resource allocation to the CHTDB programmes.

The attempted suppression of the *Shanti Bahini* insurrection took the form of co-ordinated operations conducted by four infantry brigades and a specialised counter-insurgency unit. According to a report published by Amnesty International in September 1986,[60] the military offensives, though involving heavy casualties among the troops and making little impact, at least in the short run, on the ferocity of the insurrection, had resulted in a civilian death-toll of about 2,000, and yet another large outflow of tribal refugees into India. This exodus is said to have had the effect of shifting certain *Shanti Bahini* bases across the frontier where, as at various times in the past, they allegedly received Indian assistance.

The efforts of the Ershad regime to prepare the ground for a negotiated settlement of the CHT dispute had mixed results. On the one hand, with the *Shanti Bahini* establishing a virtual monopoly over insurrectionary politics in the CHT, the armed conflict continued almost without respite. There is no doubt that, over time, the *Shanti Bahini* had gained in organisational strength, and that its regular cadres, never exceeding a few thousands (estimates varied from 2,000 to 5,000), had developed into an efficient fighting machine seemingly indomitable in

guerrilla warfare. On the other hand, the government's conciliatory moves did evoke a positive response from those for whom both the unequivocal demand for tribal autonomy backed by excessive violence, as well as the Chakma dominance of CHT politics, were becoming increasingly unacceptable. This trend was evidently a consequence of the gradual emergence in the tribal communities of a relatively moderate and educated leadership which, on account of the links it had forged with the national mainstreams, was receptive to the idea of local self-government in the CHT within the unitary constitution of Bangladesh.

Thus, while the JSS hard-liners persisted with their demand for autonomy, and the *Shanti Bahini* continued its insurrection, the government, being aware of the undercurrents of opposition to these organisations in the CHT, established a 'National Committee' entrusted with the task of undertaking consultations towards a negotiated political settlement of the tribal dispute.

The expected compromise, reached in 1988, took the form of a 'Memorandum of Understanding' signed by representatives of the government and those of the non-JSS tribal leadership. Its key elements constituted an offer to the tribes of facilitating local self-government within the framework of three 'Hill District Councils.' The signing of this agreement evoked a furiously hostile reaction from the *Shanti Bahini* which took the form of a spate of assassinations and abduction of the CHT signatories. Despite this, however, the Councils, formed on the basis of elections conducted in February 1989, began to function, evidently with considerable mass support. This was, in essence, an exposure of the fact that the militants lacked the backing of the large majority of the CHT tribal people.

Peace efforts were pursued with renewed vigour in the period after the parliamentary elections of February 1991. Early in the tenure of the new government headed by Begum Khaleda Zia, and against the backdrop of improved Indo-Bangladeshi relations, the Delhi government agreed to facilitate the repatriation of CHT refugees from India. This, in effect, was an undertaking to prevent the use of Indian territory as guerrilla bases. Meanwhile the Bangladesh government set up a multi-party 'Political Committee' to conduct negotiations with the JSS/*Shanti Bahini* leaders.

The submissions made by the militants to the 'Political Committee' took the form of several demands which may be outlined as follows:

1. Constitutional guarantees for a special administrative status to the CHT, converted to a single administrative and political unit, and renamed as *Jummaland*

2. Establishment of an autonomous 'Regional Council' for the CHT with substantial executive authority, including police powers
3. Constitutional recognition of 10 ethnic communities of the CHT (four tribal groups to be denied such recognition)
4. Creation of a separate central government ministry for CHT affairs, and the reservation of 3 seats in the national parliament for each of the Hill Districts
5. Eviction of all Bengalis settled in the CHT since 1947.

The negotiations between the 'Political Committee' and representatives of the militants have been conducted intermittently since November 1992 for well over three years, accompanied by an officially declared cease-fire (extended from time to time) of which there have been occasional violations. During this period many refugees are reported to have returned from India and settled in the CHT with various forms of government assistance. As matters stood in the mid-1990s, however, little progress had been made in the form of significant shifts in the negotiating stand taken by the JSS/*Shanti Bahini* representatives.

Some of the demands placed before the 'Political Committee' such as those concerning the eviction of settlers who have migrated into the CHT since 1947 are steps which no government could be expected to take. Certain others—for example, those relating to the exclusion of four tribes from constitutional recognition, and the naming of the CHT as *Jummaland*—if granted, would be discriminatory. In a country in which the large majority suffers from deprivation and want, it is also unrealistic for minority groups to expect concessions that would amount to 'reverse discrimination' against the majority community. Yet, impartial opinion is that a series of changes could, in fact, be made by way of meeting the demands, while maintaining the essence of the unitary state structure of Bangladesh. Such changes, it is advocated, should include the constitutional recognition of Bangladesh as a multi-ethnic nation, providing for weighted representation of the tribal minorities in the national legislature, devolution of political authority from the central government to regional/local governments, facilitating the preservation of the cultural identity of the tribal groups, and halting immigration to the CHT.

In the atmosphere of political unrest which prevailed during the months that preceded the national elections of June 1996 (p 57, below) no progress could have been made in the efforts to resolve the CHT dispute. It is of interest to note, however, that at these elections, there was an overall voter turnout of 60.1% in the three predominantly tribal electorates of Rangamati, Banderban and Khagdachadi. Though this was about ten

percentage points lower than the average for all electorates, for an insurrection-affected part of the country, it represents participation rate which is not entirely unsatisfactory.

CONFLICT SITUATIONS: INSTABILITY OF GOVERNANCE

At the core of conflict situations of the type examined in the previous section are divergences of interests, perceptions and aspirations that are based on ‘primordial group identities’ which constitute the cultural mosaic of South Asia. Within each nation state of the region one also encounters conflicts that are rooted in ‘associational identities’ which either correspond to or cut across cultural and socio-economic stratifications. Associational identities may be formal as in institutions such as political parties and trade unions, or informal as in social categories like the ‘proletariat,’ the ‘peasantry’ or the ‘youth.’ Their delineations may be rigid or flexible, and permanent or ephemeral. The disputes they generate may take the form of competitive democratic politics at national and sub-national levels. They could also take the form of armed conflict.

In studies of violent conflict there has always been a tendency to focus on confrontations generated by primordial identities. Disputes that are based on associational identities also attract attention when they take the form of anti-systemic insurrections or revolutionary upheavals in which the contending forces are distinctive in terms of ideological commitments, causes espoused and objectives pursued. If, however, the level of violence produced by inter-group disputes is employed as a definitional criterion of armed conflict, there are certain South Asian experiences which should be considered as exemplifications of armed group conflict, although each group at conflict may not be coherent and cohesive in terms of primordial or associational identities, or in respect of ideology, cause and objective, and, the conflict itself may lack genuine ingredients of insurrection or revolution.

It is possible to cite many illustrations of this latter type of conflict from the post-colonial political history of South Asia where, indeed, a strong tradition of collective political action—street riot, *hartal*, *satyagraha*, boycott, *gherao* etc.—involving violence and instigating retaliatory violence from the state, developed during the colonial era. These forms of mass action have featured, albeit at various levels of prominence, in the politics of all modern nation states including those of South Asia. From a comparative viewpoint, however, their impact on the polity appears to

have been more pronounced in Bangladesh than in the other countries of the region.

Conflict based on associational identities has been almost endemic to the 25-year history of Bangladesh. Over certain spells, their destabilising impact has paved the way for autocratic regimes. During others, they have resulted in the re-establishment of democracy. They have retarded economic development, and have had disruptive effects on electoral processes and the smooth functioning of governments installed in office. They have involved the widespread use of weaponry. The losses of life and property caused by such conflict probably exceed those attributed to other conflict situations examined in this paper.

Power Struggles and Militant Conflict

The features which appear prominent in the political history of Bangladesh (from January 1972 to January 1997) could be categorised and outlined as follows:

Category 1 - Forms of Government (see Chart 1)

During this 25-year period Bangladesh has had,

(a) 8 years and 9 months of popularly elected democratic governments with multi-party parliaments,
(b) 12 years and 10 months of autocratic regimes headed by military leaders who captured power without a known popular mandate,
(c) 2 years and 6 months of 'transitional' military rule,
(d) 4 months of caretaker governments,
(e) 7 months of one-party rule under 'emergency' regulations.

Chart 1 - Nature and Duration of the Different Forms of Government

Period	Nature of Regime	Duration
10 Jan 1972 to 28 Dec 1974	*Awami* League government in multi-party parliamentary system	3 years
25 Jan 1975 to 15 Aug 1975	One-party rule under Mujibur Rahman	7 months
15 Aug 1975 to 21 Apr 1977	Transitional phase towards military rule	1 year 8 months
21 Apr1977 to 30 May 1981	Regime of General Ziaur Rahman	4 years 1 month
30 May 1981 to 24 Mar 1982	Transitional military regime	10 months
24 Mar 1982 to 6 Dec 1990	Regime of General Mohammad Ershad	8 years 9 months
6 Dec 1990 to 6 Feb 1991	Caretaker administration	2 months
6 Feb 1991 to 30 Mar 1996	Bangladesh Nationalist Party government headed by Khaleda Zia with multi-party parliament	5 years 2 months
30 Mar 1996 to 12 Jun 1996	Caretaker administration	2 months +
12 Jun 1996 Onwards	*Awami* League government headed by Sheikh Hasina with multi-party parliament (up to 12 Jan 1997)	7 months

Category 2 - Transfers of Power

Bangladesh has hitherto had 8 changes from one system of government to another which may be classified as follows: *

		number of occasions
(a)	Peaceful transfers of office from caretaker administrations to democratically elected governments	2
(b)	Caused by assassinations of heads of government	2
(c)	Caused by military coups (*sans* assassinations)	1
(d)	Caused by popular upheavals	2
(e)	Changes introduced under ‘emergency regulations.’	1

* excluding the change represented by the constitution of November 1972 and the parliamentary elections held on 7 March 1973 which stabilised the *Awami* League government

Category 3 - National Elections

Twelve national polls (parliamentary and presidential elections, and referendums) have been held in Bangladesh since its inception (Chart 2). Three such polls (parliamentary elections of 1973, 1991 and June 1996) were relatively free of serious charges of malpractices. At the presidential elections of 1978, 1981 and 1986, the parliamentary elections of 1979, 1986 and 1987, and the referendums of 1977 and 1985, all conducted under autocratic military regimes, there were serious discrepancies between the official claims and the estimates by independent observers in regard to voter turn-out, allegations of extensive vote rigging and voter intimidation, and landslide victories reported for the government candidate or the ruling party. The same could be said of the parliamentary elections conducted by the BNP regime in February 1996. At some of these polls (referendum of 1977, parliamentary elections of 1986, 1987 and February 1996, and the presidential election of 1986) all or most of the main opposition parties did not or could not participate.

Chart 2 - National Elections in Bangladesh: Main Features

Year/Type		Percent officially reported to have been secured by the ruling party or the regime under which the poll was conducted	Features		
1973,	Parliamentary	97.6% of seats		A	
1977,	Referendum	98.9% of votes	B	C	
1978,	Presidential	76.0% of votes	B		
1979,	Parliamentary	69.6% of seats	B		
1981,	Presidential	65.5% of votes	B		
1985,	Referendum	94.0% of votes		B	C
1986,	Parliamentary	51.0% of seats		B	C
1986,	Presidential	84.0% of votes	B	C	
1987,	Parliamentary	83.7% of seats		B	C
1991,	Parliamentary	*		A	
1996,	Feb. Parliamentary	84.3% of seats		B	C
1996,	June Parliamentary	*		A	

Features: A - fair poll, results accepted without serious challenge
B - extensive vote rigging and intimidation of voters
C- election boycotted by most of the opposition parties
* - poll conducted under caretaker governments

Category 4 - Extra-Parliamentary Agitation

Mass agitation and protest have throughout been important elements of the political process. In their frequency of occurrence, intensity, and the levels of violence with which they have been associated, a clear distinction cannot be made between tenures of democratically elected governments and those of autocratic regimes. In certain instances, such agitation and protest have been featured by armed confrontations between groups with associational identities of the type referred to earlier. As made evident in the discussions which follow, from a comparative perspective, it appears that they have had a much greater impact on the directions of political change in Bangladesh than in most other countries.

Militant Politics of the Mujibur Era

The endemicity of conflict in Bangladesh has been the subject of analytical comment in many scholarly writings some of which stress that the tide of national unity and consensus which culminated in the liberation of Bangladesh was not devoid of undercurrents of discord, and that once independence was achieved, there was a rapid dissipation of the unifying forces that had sustained the Bangladeshi nationalist sentiments under Pakistani dominance.

This, according to certain critics, was a failure in leadership which, during the formative stages of Bangladesh, took several specific forms. Pointing out that "the national liberation struggle was itself contested and sections of fellow Bengalis fought alongside Pakistani soldiers against what they called the break-up of Pakistan," Khondker[61] has argued that the *Awami* leadership failed to build up a national consensus even among those who had constituted the vanguard of the liberation struggle. This same assertion has been elaborated by Ray[62] who has highlighted the fact that, although most of the *Awami* League leaders did not actually participate in the liberation war, after the war they claimed a monopoly over state power. The consequence of this, according to Ray, was that the "radical young men, who effectively participated in the liberation war but did not belong to the *Awami* League, felt cheated when they were excluded from political power after independence." Sobhan,[63] while stressing the legitimacy of the formal arrogation political power over the new nation by the *Awami* League, has spelt out, in the following terms, one of the main problems it had in the effective exercise of that power towards nation building.

> "A new generation of youth had come of age in the liberation war, who had been through a cultural revolution where they had been exposed to guns and learnt to use them for the first time in contemporary Bengali history. Some 100,000 or so weapons were in private hands at the time of liberation which severely strained the capacity of the new government to restore law and order. Extravagant expectations vested in a new state are burden enough. But when these expectations are held by people with guns in their hands this indicates an altogether different scene."

The liberation of Bangladesh, as discussed in an earlier section of this report, was the culmination of a long drawn-out political struggle to which the *Awami* League provided leadership. Yet, it was finally achieved through an internal armed uprising, to the success of which military

support from India was a crucial factor. Several groups within Bangladesh were key participants in the uprising. First, there were the Bengali sections of the Pakistani army—mainly the East Bengal Regiment—at least a part of which appears to have secretly collaborated with the *Awami* leaders since the late 1960s, and finally fought alongside other liberation forces during the confrontation with Pakistan. Secondly, there was the 'liberation army'—*Mukthi Bahini*—ardent in its commitment to the struggle for independence, and numerically larger but less well trained and armed than the loyalists to the cause from the regular army. Thirdly, there were many nondescript armed groups with limited recourse to weaponry, engaged in many vital tasks of disruption and sabotage of Pakistani bureaucratic and military operations in the eastern wing of the country.

As Maniruzzaman[64] and Hossain[65] have explained, what became the regular army of Bangladesh at the time of independence was organised by key personnel of the former East Bengal Regiment and the *Mukthi Bahini*. The latter was also the principal source for military recruitment. Both these organisations were, of course, highly politicised even during pre-liberation times. Within the officer corps of the army there were differences in both internal factional linkages as well as loyalty to the *Awami* League. Following the post-liberation return of Bengali troops stranded in West Pakistan during the war, there emerged considerable rivalry between the "war veterans" and the "repatriates," increasing the complexity of factionalism in the regular army. Similarly, among the *Mukthi Bahini* there were the pro-*Awami* and anti-*Awami* factions. In addition, there were the diverse political alignments among the 'civilian' armed groups and those formerly in the *Mukthi Bahini* ranks who, at the end of the war, had returned to civilian life and assumed roles in student and trade union politics or as party activists, often retaining their arms and a militancy of outlook.

The first national elections of Bangladesh, held in March 1973, gave Mujibur Rahman and his party a massive popular mandate in terms of seats won by the *Awami* League in the *Jatiya Sangshad* (national parliament). Yet, it soon appeared that the victory was not an indication of a trend towards broad-based consensus. Allegedly, the election hustlings were not free of the crude exercise of muscle-power and other malpractices by the ruling party. This had the effect of intensifying the existing factional animosities, and legitimising violence in the electoral process. Furthermore, as Chowdhury and Barman have shown,[66] "the *Awami* League strategy of applying maximum pressure to win every parliamentary seat (and) wipe out the opposition parties... had a dysfunctional impact on the fledgling parliamentary system," in the sense

that the parliament elected, though faction ridden, also had the semblance of one-party rule.

The problems of the *Awami* government were exacerbated by two other factors, the first of which arose out of the nature of the relations its leaders, including Mujibur Rahman, had with India. In the period leading up to the liberation, the *Awami* League had the strong backing of New Delhi. Nevertheless, after liberation, for reasons to which reference has already been made, at inter-governmental negotiations, Bangladesh failed to gain any significant concessions from India in disputed issues such as those relating to territory and river water. This was widely perceived in Bangladesh, especially among the sections of the military that were hostile to India, as a manifestation of the Dhaka government's subservience to Indian interests.[67] The second factor was the failure of the government to fulfil the economic expectations of the people. Indeed, with the enormity of the losses and disruptions suffered during the war (see p 59 below), the natural calamities of 1974 and '75 which resulted in large-scale crop failures, and with relatively little international support for economic reconstruction and disaster relief, the popular expectations for rapid advances in income and employment were themselves unrealistic. Yet, with the acute scarcity of food and soaring prices, the destitution of the people was real enough. It was this reality more than all else that generated widespread hostility towards the government.

Early in his tenure as head of government, Mujibur Rahman had resorted to a strategy of building up an armed 'National Guard' comprising personnel on whose loyalty he could depend. *Jatiya Rakshi Bahini*, as this paramilitary force was called, was manned largely by pro-*Awami* members of the *Mukthi Bahini*, and was used by Mujibur for suppressing opposition.[68] As political dissension heightened, the government expanded the *Jatiya Rakshi Bahini* in size and enhanced its military strength (evidently at the expense of the regular army), and became increasingly dependent on it for safeguarding its power.

Against the backdrop of the foregoing trends there was a sharp escalation of political violence in the later stages of the Mujibur regime. According to Chowdhury and Barman,[69] "the different socio-political forces that (had) fought to achieve the common goal of liberation, disintegrated after the war, and radical insurgency, especially in the rural areas, began to threaten the security of life and property; the common targets of the radical forces being the *Awami* leaders and police stations." These writers have claimed that by December 1974, more than 3,000 *Awami* League activists, including four parliamentary members, had been killed by the terrorists.

The loss of popular support that had found expression in an apparently uncontrollable insurrection, on the one hand, and the growing doubt about the loyalty of the regular army, on the other, prompted Mujibur Rahman to resort to the gamble of declaring a "state of emergency," suspending the constitution, dissolving parliament, and banning all political parties other than his own newly constituted 'Bangladesh *Krishak Sramic Awami* League' (BAKSAL). He intensified the crackdown against insurgent groups and other political opponents, employing the *Jatiya Rakshi Bahini* for the purpose. According to Maniruzzaman,[70] Mujibur also announced an intention of increasing the strength of this 'national guard' from 25,000 in 1975 to 130,000 in 1980. By August 1975, an estimated 62,000 persons had been imprisoned by the government for political reasons.[71]

It was at this stage that the strained relations between the government and a large section of the regular army took the form of open confrontation. General Ziaur Rahman, the most prominent among the senior officers of the regular army during the liberation war, began criticising the government in public. His anti-Mujibur stand evidently found tacit endorsement from many quarters including powerful sections of the bureaucracy (mainly on the grounds of excessive political interference in administration), the banned political parties (including those that had been proscribed for religious extremism), many in the industrial and business elite (disgruntled by Mujibur's 'socialist' policies), and some among those claiming to represent the interests of the oppressed workers and peasants.[72] Even more significantly, as later events were to show, there was a sharp polarisation of factional loyalties within the army, with those opposed to Mujibur Rahman for various reasons—his socialist leanings, his pro-Indian stance in foreign relations, alleged neglect of the army, personal grievances—closing ranks. The final blow against the Mujibur regime came in the form of a *coup d'état* staged on 15 August 1975 by a group of military officers and a few civilians, which involved, among other things, the slaughter of Mujibur Rahman along with most of his family members and some of his close associates.

The coup marked the onset of a new phase of political upheavals in Bangladesh in which mass involvement was minimal and the general directions of change were guided by a bewilderingly complex struggle for power between different factions within the army. Certain specifics of this tragic episode are yet to be unravelled. Over several months, there were coups and counter-coups, mutinies, murders of senior offices, formal executions at the command of military tribunals, shoot-outs and abductions, which were often featured by changes in the configurations of factional and personal alliances or rivalries. The outcome of this struggle

was the emergence of General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) into a position of almost undisputed leadership, first, in the army, and later, of the country.[73] Zia's success, it appears, was due mainly to the fact that, despite his pre-eminent stature in the military elite, until the decisive final stages of this power struggle—in which he was, of course, a key participant—he remained without firm ideological or personal commitments.

The Military Regimes: Continuing Conflict

General Ziaur Rahman who, by mid-1976, had consolidated his position as the military strong-man and, hence, the *de facto* ruler of Bangladesh, still continued to face opposition from both civilian organisations as well as sections of the armed forces. The civilian challenge came from several quarters such as the leaders of BAKSAL and other pro-*Awami* groups, the radical *Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal* (which had considerable support among urban youth and rank and file of the army) and other numerically small but militant Marxist groups. On the military side, apart from remnants of the *Jatiya Rakshi Bahini*, there were the regulars who were loyal to the radicals among the military elite. Suppressing this opposition was foremost in Zia's priorities.

In the latter half of 1976, Zia subdued several minor revolts in the army in the course of which some of his military rivals were killed or sacked. One of the bloodiest episodes in the military history of Bangladesh occurred in 1977, several months after Zia took over the presidency. It took the form of a mutiny staged by the army radicals, evidently at the instigation of the *Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal*. Its suppression, according to Makeig,[74] involved a ruthless purge with more than 1,100 executions and the disbanding of several army units. Meanwhile, being acutely conscious of his lack of widespread popular support, Zia set about the task of forming alliances with political groups that had been driven underground during the Mujibur regime, and relaxed the existing restrictions on the activities of moderate political parties. More significantly, he embarked upon a campaign of his own to appeal directly to the public for consensus and support for a political agenda ostensibly intended to bring about stability in the country and the restoration of democratic rule. He backed this appeal by taking a centrist stance in economic policy, and by discarding the principle of secularism to which the earlier regime had been committed.

The referendum conducted by Zia on 30 May 1977 was no doubt intended to serve as both a test as well as a show of popular support for the new policy orientations. Given the political context in which the poll

was taken, it could not have been a genuine assessment of popular feeling. Yet, the claimed support for the policies by almost 99% of the electorate undoubtedly indicated the prospect available to the Zia regime for building up a popular base.

In pursuance of this prospect, Zia entered into an alliance with six political parties to form a 'national front' which backed him at the Presidential election held on 21 April 1978. He secured 76% of the total vote, with the other serious contestant polling 21%.[75] Soon thereafter, he formed a new party under his own leadership—Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—mobilising support from many sections of the electorate. In declared policy, the party was intended to cut across social stratifications and reach disparate group interests of the electorate in both rural as well as urban areas. In organisation, with hierarchically arranged linkages between the constituent groups and the party high command, it was close knit. At the parliamentary elections held in February 1979, the BNP won 207 out of the total of 300 seats. With various restrictions imposed on the opposition parties, the BNP's nearest rival, the *Awami* League, which was still in disarray, secured only 41 seats.

The Zia regime had certain features which should have contributed towards bringing about political stability in Bangladesh. There was, first, the improvement of Indo-Bangladeshi relations and the consequent benefits (p 19 above). Secondly, since the mid-1970s, there had been a perceptible buoyancy of the economy—the result of relatively favourable weather conditions, corrective measures on industrial and trade dislocations, and greater inflow of aid. The employed population, as reported at census enumerations, had increased from 20 million in 1974 to 25.3 million in 1981.[76] That the resulting gains were being felt, especially in the urban sector, was evidenced by concurrent changes in real wages and incomes (Table 8). Moreover, as part of official policy, there was an increase of resources channelled into the armed forces, which, as intended, had the effect of reducing discontent in the regular army. It could also be asserted that Zia's regulated pluralism in electoral politics (as represented by the national elections referred to above), though falling far short of democratic ideals, was a distinct improvement on the autocratic dispensation which was in vogue over a grater part of the 1970s.

Table 8
Industrial Wages and Per Capita Incomes during the Zia Regime

Indices of Real Wages among Industrial Workers (1969=100)		Per Capita Real Incomes at 1973 prices (Tk)	
		Urban	Rural
1975-76	190	1,946	611
1976-77	201	2,047	594
1977-78	214	2,106	628
1978-79	269	2,282	627
1979-80	314	2,431	632
1980-81	373	n.a.	n.a.

Based on Ahmed and Mondal, 1993; Momin, 1992[77]

However, the Zia regime, even after its early turbulent years, was never entirely free of militant confrontation. Apart from the thwarted military coup attempts of September and October 1977, industrial unrest was rampant, and there were several episodes of violent mass protest that evoked the retaliatory use of force by the police and the army. Zia's method of building up trade union and youth support for the BNP through favouritism is also said to have resulted in the blatant exercise of violence by pro-government groups operating at the level of institutions such as universities and urban work places. Evidently, the government made no attempt to curb the rising tide of corruption and lawlessness. More generally, "...militarisation of the civil administration was pursued as a strategy (and, while) in every Cabinet formed by Zia there were a few military personnel, many prestigious postings in the corporations, Secretariat, police and the missions abroad were filled by Zia's trusted military colleagues."[78] Needless to stress, these created intense resentment among those outside the favoured circles. It is widely believed that Zia's assassination by a group of army officers on 30 May 1981, and the absence of a popular reaction of anger or grief to this stunning act of violence which obviously had far-reaching consequences indicated the extent to which the resentment against the regime had spread.

The brief interregnum of Abdus Sattar, the successor of the slain Ziaur Rahman as acting president (and then as president on the basis of an almost farcical election held in November 1981 at which he was reported to have obtained 65% of the vote), ended with a military coup led by General Husain Muhammad Ershad on 22 March 1982. Ershad, a career officer of the army who had risen to the rank of Chief of Staff when Zia vacated that post in 1978, declared that the overthrow of Sattar was prompted by the need to strengthen the economy, eliminate corruption,

and pave the way for the emergence of genuine democratic governance in Bangladesh. According to observations made by several critics,[79] however, it appears that the real reasons for the coup were Ershad's personal quest for power in the political vacuum created by the death of Zia, and the desire on the part of a large section of the military elite to check the possible decline in its power and influence in the face of the on-going disintegration of the large conglomerate of support which BNP had attracted when Zia ruled the country.

Following the coup, Ershad proclaimed martial law and assumed the position of Chief Martial Law Administrator. He disbanded the parliament, prohibited all party activities, divided the country into five military zones each of which was placed under the command of an army officer on whom he had trust, and established a system of military tribunals vested with judicial functions relating to "Political crimes."[80] A campaign against corruption launched by Ershad involved the imprisonment of several hundreds of politicians including six former cabinet ministers.[81] In development policy, he advocated a reduction of state intervention in the economy. He gave greater emphasis than Zia to the concept of converting Bangladesh into an Islamic state.

The first expression of serious opposition to Ershad came almost an year after he took over the reins of government in the form of a protest demonstration in Dhaka against one of his religious reforms which sought to introduce the study of Arabic as a compulsory component of the school curriculum. This was countered with an excessive show of force by the government resulting in the death of several students and leading to sporadic riots in the city, met, in turn, with further use of military force. This episode of violence marked the onset of a phase of militant civilian resistance to the Ershad regime which increased in intensity with the passage of time and lasted almost until the early months of 1991. The twin strands of national politics of this phase were represented by Ershad's relentless efforts to legitimise his regime through mobilisation of popular support while retaining his own power and authority, and the equally ardent resistance to his rule by two broad-based political alliances, one centered around the *Awami* League, and the other around the BNP. The former was being led by Sheikh Hasina Waheed, the daughter of Mujibur Rahman, and the latter, by Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of Ziaur Rahman.

In late 1983, Ershad formed the so-called *Janadal*, an organisation intended to muster popular support for his policies (announced in the form of an 'Eighteen-Point Programme') for which, following a concerted propaganda drive, he sought public approval through a referendum to be conducted in March 1985. Meanwhile, despite the prevailing ban on

political parties, the oppositional alliances staged various forms of protest demanding the withdrawal of martial law as a precondition to holding a national poll. The government response to this took the form of increased intensity of its offensive against the opposition. The referendum was held as scheduled with a massive show of military strength in all its procedures, and, according to its results as announced by the government, the Ershad policy package had received the approval of 94% of the people.

Elections to local government bodies (May, 1985), and to the parliament (May, 1986) followed closely in the heels of the referendum. By this stage Ershad had lifted certain restrictions on political party activities, and converted his *Janadal* into an electoral organisation named the *Jatiyo* Party. As a concession to the opposition, he had also relaxed the 'emergency laws' and disbanded a part of his martial law administrative apparatus. The main contestants at the parliamentary elections were the *Jatiyo* Party and a section of the coalition led by the *Awami* League. The period leading up to the elections was featured by extensive civil disorder and military repression. The election procedures were accompanied by the usual array of government-sponsored malpractices. The veracity of the officially reported voter turnout of 60% was widely disbelieved. The results, as announced by the government, gave the *Jatiyo* Party an absolute majority in the national parliament, with the *Awami* coalition forming the main opposition group having only 32% of the seats.

Ershad's next major step towards legitimising his rule over Bangladesh took the form of a presidential election conducted in October 1986. It was boycotted by all opposition parties. At this election, Ershad claimed to have obtained 84% of the poll. The officially declared voter turnout of 54% was refuted by the opposition according to which it was less than 3%. The riots that followed the announcement of these results led to the re-introduction of the ban on all forms of mass protest, the internment of anti-government political leaders including Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, and an overall tightening up army control over the country. A similar electoral farce was repeated at yet another general parliamentary election held in March 1988 in which, once again, the two opposition alliances did not participate. As the Ershad regime would have it, the *Jatiyo* Party won 251 *Sangshad* seats.

The final phase of the Ershad regime was one of persistent political chaos. In June and July 1987, there was a series of strikes of short duration followed by a prolonged general strike throughout the country in October, and the "Siege of Dhaka" in November that year. Government measures to quell the related disorder took the form of military action which often resulted in death and injury, as, for example, it did during the strike of 24 July when the officially reported death toll was 11. With the approaching

local government elections fixed for February 1988 and the parliamentary elections for the following month, civil commotion reached unprecedented heights. According to official sources, retaliatory action by the army during the period of the elections caused the death of 85 persons and injury to about 500—the opposition estimates were 150 dead, and 8,000 injured.[82] In yet another civilian-military confrontation in October 1990, 5 were killed and several hundreds were injured. This event, according to Chowdhury and Barman,[83] brought about a united front of twenty-two student organisations pledged to free the country from autocratic rule. The opposition alliances, despite their ever-present mutual animosities, had closed ranks and issued a joint declaration demanding the resignation of Ershad, and the transfer of power to an interim regime entrusted with the task of conducting free and fair elections for the re-establishment of a parliamentary system of government. Faced by irresistible pressures which extended well beyond party politics—mass resignation of government officers, campaigns of resistance by professional organisations including those of the judiciary, and, above all, the withdrawal of support by the army—Ershad's last-ditch attempts to cling on to power by re-declaring a 'state of emergency' failed. On 6 December 1990, he stepped down from office, handing over state power to a neutral caretaker government.

Conflict under Democratic Governance

General elections were conducted by the caretaker government on 27 February 1991. The main contestants for the 300 *Sangshad* seats were the three alliances led respectively by the BNP, the *Awami* League and the *Jatiyo* Party. The *Jamaat-i-Islami* espousing religious fundamentalism was informally aligned with the BNP. In the first round of polling, the BNP had won 138 seats and emerged as the largest party in parliament, followed by the *Awami* League with 85 seats. When all by-elections and indirect elections as constitutionally provided for were complete, The BNP had 170 seats, the *Awami* League 91, the *Jatiyo* Party 35, and the *Jamaat* 20 seats.

Unlike at earlier polls, the elections of 1991 were reported to have been free of malpractices. Violent confrontations among the contestants were also reported to be minimal—according to Chowdhury and Barman[84] the entire elections campaign had cost *only* 48 lives! The largely successful conduct of the elections meant that for the first time after more than fifteen years Bangladesh had the institutional base for genuine democratic government. With an amendment to the constitution formulated with multi-party consensus and ratified at a referendum conducted on 15

September 1991, a parliamentary system with a Prime Minister as head of government replaced the earlier presidential system.

The resurgent democratic governance in Bangladesh soon began to be destabilised by several factors. First, there were the indelible memories of past hostilities which continued to haunt inter-personal and inter-party relations in the *Sangshad*. Both Prime Minister Khaleda as well as leader of the opposition Hassina had their inherited charisma to protect and perpetuate with conflicting interpretations of past events. The collaboration between the BNP and the *Awami* League in the latter part of the Ershad regime was no more than a temporary alliance of political strategy between two groups that had deep-seated mutual animosities. Secondly, the election of Abdur Rahman Biswas, a member of the BNP, to the post of Speaker of *Sangshad*, and his subsequent elevation to the post of President of Bangladesh, generated fierce opposition on the grounds of his past affiliation to the Muslim League and his alleged collaboration with the Pakistani army during the liberation war.[85] And then, there was Ershad who had to be tried and convicted for past crimes. A more serious controversy—one which involved street riots and police violence developed when certain politically powerful groups demanded the trial of Golam Azam (a Pakistani national), the leader of *Jamaat-i-Islam*, as a "war criminal ... whose party took up arms to perpetuate genocide, rape and destruction during the Liberation War."[86] The opposition parties launched a boycott of parliament on this issue. The *Jamaat* was, of course, in informal alliance with the ruling party at this time.

Generally, the build-up of opposition to the BNP regime both within and outside parliament was centred around the theme of government-sponsored terrorism and corruption. According to Habib,[87] the terrorism charge related mainly to the activities of the "militant student force of the ruling party"—the *Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal*. It has, however, been pointed out[88] that all major political parties routinely depend on bands of desperados and terrorists whose services were considered indispensable for party survival. In describing the BNP's relations with its own criminal fringe, Khondker[89] has asserted that "...mobsters, hooligans and corrupt politicians (were) thrown up by the government to top positions, (and) its student supporters turned racketeers and musclemen." Apart from the resulting public resentment, these developments, as past experiences always show, are ratchet phenomena which, once set in motion, could proceed only in one direction. Corruption was almost unconcealed, and is said to have taken the form of nepotism and discrimination, political interference with administrative procedures, personal aggrandisement of the politicians concerned, and the distribution of favours among diverse

groups including the business-industrial elite in exchange for loyalty and financial support.

Yet another important cause for the intensification of extra-parliamentary agitation at this time was the equivocal position of the BNP government in relation to religious fundamentalism. At the parliamentary elections of 1991 which brought the BNP into office, one of its main campaign themes was that of making Bangladesh an Islamic state. But, once in office, it could no longer accommodate the demands of Islamic extremist groups, and was compelled (as it happened in the much publicised Taslima Nasreen affair of mid-1974) to resort to the use of force for curbing the violence which erupted between Islamic radicals and other groups committed to secularism and preservation of individual freedoms.

In the context of the foregoing trends, and the ever present challenge from the *Awami* League, it did not take long for the initial popularity of the BNP to be eroded. Its integrity began to be questioned not only by its parliamentary rivals but even by many of its erstwhile supporters. In the absence of tangible economic advances, the sense of resentment among the people against the government fermented, and turned gradually into frequent street demonstrations, strikes and other forms of mass protest led invariably by the *Awami* League which, along with some of its allies, kept away from parliamentary sittings. By the mid-1990s, as the next general elections approached, there was a strong build-up of pressure on the BNP to resign and entrust the task of conducting the elections to an interim government.

The government's response to this pressure was almost identical to that of its predecessor of the late 1980s. Towards the end of its tenure, it dissolved parliament and scheduled elections to a new parliament. The opposition parties campaigned intensely against this move and boycotted the elections that were conducted on 15 February 1996. According to the officially declared results of the poll, the BNP had won 253 seats, 2 seats were won by other contestants, and polling was not completed due to disruptions in 45 constituencies. The voter turnout, as reported by independent observers, was no more than 10%. As evidence of vote rigging, instances of BNP candidates polling 100% or more of the total number of registered voters in two constituencies have been cited.[90]

In the aftermath of these elections, the opposition protest climaxed to create in the country conditions of almost total anarchy reminiscent of the last days of the Ershad regime. Finally, following some unsuccessful attempts at reaching a compromise, the government resigned and made way for fresh parliamentary elections to be conducted by an interim administration. At the elections held accordingly on 12 June 1996, procedurally proper and impartial according to neutral observers, the

Awami League won 146 seats, and was able to mobilise an absolute majority in the *Sangshad* by forging an alliance with the *Jatiyo* Party and absorbing a few others into its ranks. Given the circumstances under which the elections were conducted, the BNP performed remarkably well, obtaining almost 34% of the vote and winning 39% of the seats (Table 9).

Table 9
Party Performance at the Parliamentary Elections of June 1996

Party	Number of seats won	% of total seats	% of total votes
Awami League	146	48.7	37.5
Bangladesh Nationalist Party	116	38.7	33.6
Jatiyo Party	32	10.6	16.4
Jamaat-i-Islam	3	1.0	8.6
Others	3	1.0	3.9

ECONOMIC CHANGE AND ARMED CONFRONTATIONS

Bangladesh at inception had inherited an economy that had suffered more than two decades of exploitation and neglect. The average per capita real income, as noted by Islam,[91] was barely more than what it was in 1951. The incidence of extreme poverty had increased. With average life expectancy at birth at 48 years, an infant mortality of 144 per 1,000, and a literacy rate of about 20%, Bangladesh ranked among the poorest countries of the world. About 80% of the people depended on agriculture for their livelihood. An estimated 30% of the labour force was unemployed. Structural change in the economy throughout the 'Pakistan Period' had been negligible, the share of the GDP accounted for by modern manufacturing still being a mere 4.4%.[92]

The liberation war had left behind a trail of destruction and economic dislocation of such magnitude that the immediate problem confronting the country was a massive effort needed for relief and reconstruction. The destroyed infrastructure included 600 bridges, the ports of Chittagong and Chalna, and 554 industrial enterprises formerly under Pakistani management representing more than 75% of the country's manufacturing plant capacity, partially damaged and abandoned.[93] There was, in addition, the burden of rehabilitating ten million migrant refugees[94] that demanded immediate attention. The global economic recession of the early and mid-1970s, and the pro-Pakistan stance of

foreign relations taken by some of the main prospective donors of aid, meant that international assistance even for immediate requirements of rescue and relief was meagre.

In long-term development prospects, there were the obvious constraints of rapid population growth and scarcity of resources. The population of the Bangladeshi territory which had expanded at an average annual rate of 3% during the previous decade had, by 1972, surpassed the 75 million mark, and was expected to reach 100 million by the early 1980s.[95] Increasing the extent of arable land—the average per capita availability to the farm population at this time was 0.58 acres[96]—entailed large investments in irrigation and flood control. Domestic saving had averaged a mere 6.9% of the GNP throughout the 1960s, and showed no signs of an appreciable increase in the years ahead,[97] making both economic recovery as well as future growth heavily dependent on foreign investment and aid. Despite the enormity of the development challenge, there was a widespread sense of impatience for tangible improvements in living standards among not only the poorer strata of society but also the politically articulate 'middle class' with soaring expectations.

A basic point concerning the economy of Bangladesh on which, despite the lack of precision in the related statistical data, there could hardly be a disagreement is that overall growth rates have been low, and that throughout the past twenty-five years the trends of growth have been featured by pronounced short-term fluctuations (Table 10). Further, official computations indicate that a large proportion of growth has been accounted for by the 'Services' sector in which the product is estimated mainly on the basis of expenditure (salaries and wages paid) rather than output (Table 11). In an economy plagued by frequent disruptions, there is thus a significant element of overestimation of the overall domestic product.

Given the dismal state of the economy at the time of liberation, slow growth in the context of rapid population increase has obviously meant the persistence of low per capita real incomes. Moreover, sharp oscillations of growth rates imply that the very survival of those in the lowest income strata is imperilled from time to time. Further, in the available statistical evidence there is no indication of a long-term trend towards equalisation of incomes.[98] What this, in turn, means is that, over the years, the number of people in Bangladesh living in precarious conditions of dire poverty is likely to have increased over time.

Various sets of data on sectoral performances of the economy of Bangladesh also suggest that the phenomenon of slow growth has throughout been more pronounced in rural areas and in agriculture than

in the urban areas and in secondary and tertiary economic activities. The total cropped area under rice, according to Rahman,[99] remained almost the same from 1975 to 1988. The rate of increase in grain production (by far the most important economic activity of the rural sector) from 1972/73 to 1989/90 has averaged a mere 1.4% per annum.[100] It is also the peasantry that has been periodically crippled by the "random shocks" of natural disasters.[101] Officially published poverty measurements based on food consumption[102] indicate that the rural population in Bangladesh below the 'poverty line' has declined from 54.7 million in 1973/74 to 40.5 million in 1988/89. There is reason to suggest, however, that the main cause for this decline is the migration of the poorest rural people into the main urban areas of the country.

Table 10
Official Estimates of Changes in the Gross Domestic Product of Bangladesh, 1975 to 1992 (percentage change per annum)

	(in 1972/3 constant factor cost prices)	(in 1984/5 constant factor cost prices)
1975/6 - 1980/81	4.0	
1981 - 82	3.2	
1982 - 83	4.7	
1983 - 84	4.9	
1984 - 85	3.9	
1985 - 86		4.3
1986 - 87		4.2
1987 - 88		2.9
1988 - 89		2.5
1989 - 90		6.6
1990 - 91		3.6
1991 - 92		3.9
1992 - 93		5.0

Sources: Rashid, 1993; Farid, 1993[103]

Table 11
Sectoral Growth Rates in Bangladesh, 1970 to 1993

	(average per annum, %)	
	1970 to 1980	1980 to 1993
GDP	2.3	4.2
Agriculture	0.6	2.6
Industry	5.2	5.2
Services	3.8	5.4

Source: *World Development Report, 1995*[104]

Urbanisation in Bangladesh has proceeded throughout at a substantially higher pace than those of the other countries of South Asia (Table 12), and has also been featured by a phenomenal growth of the population in Dhaka from 600,000 in 1961 to almost 7 million by early 1991. The city now accounts for about 40% of the urban population and 6% of the total population of the country. This rapid urban growth is associated with several features that are of importance to political conflict.

Table 12
Urban Growth in South Asia: 1961 to 1990

	Average annual rate (%)	
	1961-80	1981-90
India	3.7	3.8
Bangladesh	6.9	6.6
Pakistan	4.3	4.6
Nepal	5.4	6.4
Sri Lanka	2.3	2.4

Note: These estimates are based on a standardised definition of urban, and have been extracted from UN, 1990.[105]

The inflow of refugees into Bangladesh during times of political upheavals (to which reference has been made earlier) is one of the factors that have contributed to the rapid expansion of the larger urban agglomerations of Bangladesh. People made destitute by recurrent natural calamities have also constituted periodic waves of rural to urban migration. In addition, there has been a regular trickle of rural people to the cities and the towns as a result of the constant pauperisation of segments of the peasantry, urban-rural differences in respect of access to services in social welfare, and relatively higher levels of wages and real incomes in the urban sector.

Urban life is chronically afflicted with the usual poverty-related infirmities such as residential congestion, vagrancy, malnutrition, ill-health, vice and crime which, of course, are aggravated by the political and economic refugee flows referred to above. The creation of new employment opportunities in the urban sector at all levels has never been rapid enough to keep pace with the demand for jobs. The past experience in this regard is that spurts of employment growth in urban areas as witnessed, for example, during the garment industry boom of the 1980s,[106] while causing barely perceptible temporary dips in urban unemployment rate, also have continuing lag effects of enhancing the rural-urban migration rate.

The links between the type of urban change referred to above and the increasing significance of urban civil commotion in the political dynamics of Bangladesh over the past two decades are readily evident. Rapid urban growth, when caused by immigration from diverse source areas, creates communities that are faction-ridden and intensely competitive in inter-personal relations. Periodic spurts of urban economic growth in Bangladesh have never been durable enough to satisfy the momentum of rising expectations in income and employment which such brief upsurges themselves generate. Recurrent economic recessions raise unemployment, and depress income and consumption. Under such conditions, neither concerted organisational effort nor a motive force of political ideology are essential to mobilise economic discontent for mass protest.

There are other facets of economic change that have contributed to the type of disruptive unrest that has characterised the politics of Bangladesh. In Mujibur Rahman's drive towards socialism in an economy in which the formal sector was almost entirely under state control at a time when the bureaucracy lacked the required managerial skills, official incompetence was a major cause for the poor performance of public sector industrial and commercial ventures. As several critics have shown,[107] the management failures of that time were exacerbated by both excessive political interference as well as industrial unrest. The attempts by Ziaur Rahman to reduce state intervention in the economy and stimulate private investment mainly took the form of the removal of existing ceilings on private investment, and a limited transfers of capital assets in industry and commerce from the public sector to private hands. This change, however, is said to have increased the scope for political patronage and other forms of corruption. Ershad's “New Industrial Policy” represented a further movement towards privatisation of the economy with increased emphasis on attracting foreign investment and orienting industrial production towards export. This policy change, while eventually failing to achieve the anticipated gains in investment, employment and output, facilitated corruption to reach unprecedented heights which, evidently, the democratised regime of Khaleda Zia failed to lower. It would obviously be tenuous to claim that the level of corruption in the political economy of Bangladesh has been higher than elsewhere. But, prominent themes in the electoral campaigns of political parties or of mass protests and revolts, and past rationalisations for the eviction of democratic regimes by military autocrats, seem to indicate the persistence of a popular perception in Bangladesh that economic failures are caused mainly by the pervasiveness of corruption.

It could be said that, in many ways, the economic failures of Bangladesh have been both cause as well as consequence of conflict within the polity. For example, unemployment and inflation in urban areas, and acute food scarcities in rural areas have been identified as the principal causes for the remarkably rapid loss of popular support for Mujibur Rahman in the mid-1970s. Similarly, explaining the causes for the uprising of 1990, Guhathakurta[108] emphasises that it was largely the spiralling prices of essential goods that attracted support for the revolt against Ershad from a wide spectrum of social classes in urban Bangladesh. On the other hand, according to Ahmed and Mondal,[109] retarded economic development resulting in unemployment and inflation is largely a consequence of political disorder and low productivity of labour. Through an analysis of data on labour unrest in Bangladesh from 1973 to 1990, these authors show that, the frequency of industrial disputes attributed to "political causes" shows a general trend of increase over time.

See APPENDIX

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