Political Violence in Bangladesh Today

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The article traces the roots of the current political turmoil in Bangladesh through the country's recent history of economic neoliberalisation, democratic politics and the entrenchment of a broad-based market society. It attempts to go beyond the perverse sensationalism of contemporary analyses and highlights the true nature and extent of a problem and its socio-economic embedding under neoliberalism.

The current political-economic crisis in Bangladesh is far more grave than it is made to appear. How could it be so, one may ask, when the media is replete with stories and images of daily violence and the more critical of interpretations by scholars and analysts recognise explicitly the difficulty of resolving the current debacle? What could possibly make the situation more serious than it already appears in daily newspapers and critical political commentaries? For starters, the simple recognition of the current crisis as a historical culmination of events rather than a chain of sensational, “unprecedented” occurrences, as the news media analysts would have it, has the ironic effect of making things more troublesome, so to speak.

With sensationalism, there is always this “something to look forward to” feeling—it generates a perverse sense of comfort; as if the outrageousness of tomorrow’s violence will pale the significance of today’s and somehow justify the complacency with which we confront our present (in)actions. With a historical perspective, such “comfort” is no longer possible. For instance, when the main opposition party has to resort to fake public announcements from external powers regarding its political repression to garner support and international attention, the sensationalism stirred by such reprehensible acts actually underplay the severity of the degeneration.[iii] It is not merely a case of circumstantial or individual moral relapse, but rather the current manifestation of the history of “democratic” politics in Bangladesh which cannot be treated as distinct from either the social or the economic setting within which it continues to unfold.

**Economic Gain Reigns Supreme**

Neoliberal discourse in the political sphere and its impact on economics has had significant consequences for the subsequent development of democratic politics within postcolonial
nation-states across the world as protectionist models of development gave way to export-led economic integration into global production chains and labour markets, exploiting the low cost of abundant "factors", particularly labour, progressive nationalism and its concern with equitable material progress receded to mere rhetoric, as is the case in Bangladeshi politics. Ideals of communal solidarity and grassroots democracy as well as the fulfilling of diversified industrialisation and agricultural renewal under protection, as envisaged by the progressive quarters during the struggle for democracy in the late eighties, were soon eclipsed by a singular ideal.

The spate of deregulation and privatisation measures under neoliberalism pushed by the Washington Consensus since the eighties have ensured that nothing but the ideal of economic gain through market exchange remains viable in practice. Rapid monetisation of the macroeconomy at the behest of pressures from global financial interests, along with the growth of low skilled jobs in export-oriented manufacturing, steady demand from Southeast and West Asia for low cost migrant labour and the dismantling of subsistence practices in agriculture have completed the transition to a market society for the vast majority.

The internal political sphere, which formed the explicit point of contact with the external force of neoliberalism, shaped such an economic structure with great rapidity. At the same time, the economy rendered the political increasingly dependent on its ideal of private economic gain. In other words, politics soon spoke the language of money and the market, where the equation became exceedingly simple—greater the access to economic resources, higher the probability of obtaining political power, and so on in what is increasingly a circular process of reinforcement.

The intermittent eruptions of political turmoil and its election-time intensification with the arrival of parliamentary democracy since the early nineties can be directly traced to this "circular" process. This is primarily because of the fact that the market itself, through which economic gain is generated and subsequently accumulated, simultaneously became the most important arena for the exercise of state/political power. In what would appear paradoxical, both the cause and outcome of this development is the complete dismantling of the constitutional pillars of a liberal state in the context of a dysfunctional parliament mired in the politics of confrontational boycott, and the non-separation of judiciary and civil administration from the interests of the ruling political party. Thus the state machinery increasingly functions as an effective instrument in the hands of the ruling political elite, allowing them to engage in the market in a manner where outcomes can be assured in their favor through "extra-economic" means.

In such a simultaneous nurturing of political and economic power, the envisaged libertarian constitutional checks have predictably become defunct in practice. Consequently, it is no surprise that the ruling party honchos regularly become owners of successful business groups almost overnight. Such phenomenon in turn increases their campaign budgets, bribery quotas, financial dole-outs to their constituencies and such other aspects of
economic power which better their prospects for sustaining political control. The subsequent attainment of political power ensures that these economic gains are sustained, and so on.

It quickly becomes a matter of “common sense” under the ethos of unbridled individualism and private economic gain, fostered by neoliberal discourse in society to use whatever means possible to retain political power once it is attained. Individual entrepreneurial success is elevated to the epitome of human well-being at the cost of social justice and equitable material progress, with neither the social nor the political dimension immune to its absolute encroachment. As a result, confrontations among the political-business elite have acquired a “no-holds-barred” dimension which has made possibilities for compromise progressively weak between the major factions.

**Historical Transformations in Bangladeshi Politics**

So far, the historical emphasis has briefly indicated the onset of neoliberalism and the political consequences of the establishment of a broad-based capitalist market society. This emphasis remains, of course, partial and “economistic”; moreover, it is not immune to sensationalist appropriation at the cost of comprehending actual complexities and thus failing to act, or at least act accordingly. Such partial historicism is especially prone to “sensationalist” use by the so-called progressive quarters, either consciously to justify their inability in affecting the circumstances, or unconsciously as part of an unfortunate strain of mechanistic thought as in the case of the “old” left (or whatever remains of it).

For a more comprehensive historical account of the process and its culmination into the current political situation, no room must be left for substituting the complexities of social actuality with the temporary solace provided by the likes of sensationalist accounts of contemporary events. This is done here by tracing some salient ideological aspects associated with relatively recent historical transformations in Bangladeshi politics.

While the two main opposing political factions have come to terms with the neoliberal economic reality alluded to above, their respective ideological stances remain distinct in a curious set of combinations. The common element in these combinations stems from this economic reality—neoliberal ideals of individual freedom, free enterprise, private property, export-oriented growth over employment generation, and so on are agreed upon and advanced ideologically by both factions. Combined with this, the influence of which can be attributed to global or external developments, are also the distinct ideological stances taken by both political parties which have their basis in indigenous history.

The ruling faction led by the Awami League (AL) continues to foster a Bengali nationalist, culturally-charged and populist discourse combined with an increasingly rhetorical (and thus receding to the level of ideology) insistence on public provision in socio-economic sectors. The opposing faction under the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), with its roots in a military coup, has not abandoned its traditionally rightist stance, which has indeed
received a boost under neoliberalism. It cultivates Islamic majoritarian sentiments and politics more readily and has constructed an unduly partial history of its military ruler-founder in light of the 1971 liberation struggle with a view to diminish the role of the AL and its charismatic leader and the nation’s founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

However, ideological difference regarding their respective “religious propensities” is becoming more complicated with the AL increasingly portraying a conservative, blatantly majoritarian overtone in the context of a deeper embedding of religious sentiments among the populace. Nevertheless, the AL remains committed to eradicating anti-liberation elements, with their roots in overtly religious parties like the Jama’at-e-Islam, and is more squeamish when it comes to political alliance with non-secularist forces. These remain the last vestiges of the ideological history that inform the actions of a political organisation born out of a commendable lineage of secular, anti-imperialist national struggle.

This admittedly crude categorisation of similarities and differences is nevertheless crucial for grasping the ideological context in which the contemporary power struggle in the realm of the politico-economic is playing out. The transition to a market society heavily driven by the external influences of neoliberal practice for an import-dependent country like Bangladesh appears structurally determined given the geopolitical and historical context. Thus the neoliberal economic (often synonymous with ‘development’) agenda is kept intact in the feud by both factions while mobilising confrontation around tensions emanating from these ideological distinctions.

As indicated earlier, there is a considerable overlap between the political and new business elites, which now presents a formidable conundrum. While mitigating political instability is crucial for generating economic gain in a market society, such instability is simultaneously a necessary condition for avoiding exclusion from such gain for the non-incumbent political actors and their economic interests. The vacuous appeals for political stability, which are currently flooding editorial pages and airtime, misses this fundamental antagonism. All the talk about individualistic moral lapses, the lack of patriotic fervor, the need for constitutional amends, leadership crises, and so on are simply inane in the face of the problem, but nevertheless serve an important ideological function.

Neoliberal discourse and its fatalist Thacherite slogan of “there being no alternative” engenders a formidable faith whose mantle is borne by the intellectual elite, from editors and academics to “third sector” activists. With the proliferation of market relations as the basic material component of the social fabric, these segments of the elite are in no way independent from the convoluted interests of the dominant political and economic actors. Consequently, they readily play into the ideological distinctions of the ongoing conflict, and their contribution to any lasting solution in the political arena is largely redundant. At the same time, the basic antagonism mentioned above is conveniently skirted and subsequently obscured; the easiest way to do this for all sides is to invoke sensationalist narratives at the expense of its impartial grounding in history.
What is even more worrisome is that the next generation raised amidst this degraded, non-critical intellectual environ make prospects for the future appear equally, if not more, bleak. The only voices with a modicum of critical imagination in this regard are those that have managed to acquire some degree of material distance from the current socio-political and economic entanglements. It is indeed reminiscent of Herbert Marcuse’s “substratum of outcasts and outsiders”, as those outside of the “democratic process”, which make them relatively better placed to grasp its contradictions and consequently bear greater potential for exercising their agency to initiate change. Nonetheless, it is difficult to see how this may be so in the current context; Marcuse himself points to this agency as a figment of rare chance.

No Solution in Sight

As the situation stands, it is clear that the transition to a neoliberal market society has translated into a particular type of economic antagonism for the divided ruling classes, which makes political turmoil both recurrent and prolonged. Even if the possibility of these elites uniting along common economic interests does manifest concretely in the future, the source of instability, as traced through the history of neoliberal encroachment, is clearly not addressed.

The individualistic, “entrepreneurial” discourse on well-being under neoliberalism weakens communal bonds and increase possibilities for friction. Moreover, the institutional imperative under which such changes occur also disregards distributional issues with the consequent outcome of aggravating inequalities. For example, with a population that will only get younger over the next few decades, neoliberal policies with its neglect of unemployment as the primary socio-economic issue is a clear cause for concern. If we add to that the need for meaningful employment among an increasingly aspirant youth, what we are likely to have is an unlimited supply of cannon fodder for fueling political violence.

The “thinking minds” are progressively unhelpful; in fact, neoliberal hegemony and its resulting consequences have made them instruments for fueling the ideological contraptions associated with the opposing political factions at the cost of using their energies for comprehending the true nature of the problem. Hence, the possibilities for envisaging lasting democratic solutions from this quarter appear exceedingly low. Moreover, the present commentator is part of Marcuse’s “substratum of outcasts” and shares the latter’s pessimism regarding the agency of this substratum in envisaging and mobilising solutions.

Nevertheless, the task here has been of a rather different kind – one that recognises the relevance of understanding the recent history behind the recurrent political turmoil in Bangladesh and bring to the fore an important yet increasingly sidelined perspective. As a result, it was necessary to shift away from sensationalist commentaries and concentrate on the particular aspect of the interplay of external dynamics and the internal polity in arriving at a historically-informed interpretation of the present crisis. The kind of complexities
entailed in such a task inevitably renders it incomplete. Notwithstanding such shortcomings, the idea has been to point towards the true nature of the problem and thus urge concerned people everywhere to look at its relevant dimensions.

Notes

[i] The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led opposition has twice made false announcements in recent weeks since the onset of its programme of indefinite blockades from January 5. The first was an alleged statement made by the US House Foreign Affairs Committee and certain members of Congress condemning the political repression being carried out under the ruling party, which was official denounced by the Committee chair as 'fraudulent' a few days later (http://www.thedailystar.net/tarique-s-aide-sent-fraudulent-statement-59256). A second incident involved an alleged call from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chief Amit Shah to BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia inquiring about the latter's 'health'. This was announced by Khaleda Zia's press secretary and was later denied by the BJP chief (http://www.thedailystar.net/no-phone-call-to-khaleda-59301).

[ii] David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005) provides a comprehensive exploration of cases across the world in this regard.

[iii] Ibid. See specifically the third chapter on the neoliberal state which makes some interesting indications towards the rising importance of “entrepreneurial success” and its relationship with the discourse on well being under neoliberalism (p. 64-86)


[v] Ibid.