

# The Left and Social-Movement Struggles in Bangladesh

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Bangladesh, (East Bengal before its independence in 1971) is a country with a strong tradition of struggle. Struggles of workers and peasants have always been very widespread and combative there and the Left, although weak and divided, remains powerful, with considerable mass support.

The Bangladeshi Left was profoundly marked by the international division between the Maoist and Stalinist currents. The Communist Party of East Pakistan (Bangladesh since 1971) itself was divided between a pro-Moscow wing and a pro-Beijing wing. These two currents took radically opposed positions during the war of liberation in 1971. The pro-Moscow current, the Bangladeshi Communist party (CPB), supported the war of liberation and the establishment of socialism in Bangladesh by the parliamentary road. This orientation led it to move closer to the Awami League [1] which came to power after the war of liberation.

The majority of the pro-Beijing wing, following Mao's position of being opposed to the partition of Pakistan, did not support the war of liberation. It denounced it as an "Indo-Soviet machination" designed to favour Indian expansionism in the region and Soviet hegemony. The Maoist current paid a high price for going against the current in a war that was supported massively by the population. After 1971 it split into innumerable factions and was durably weakened.

During the 1970s and 1980s, a succession of military dictatorships accentuated the difficulties of development of revolutionary and radical parties, reinforcing tendencies towards division. Today the Bangladeshi Left is divided into two distinct blocs. Parties like the CPB and the Workers' Party have chosen to collaborate with the Awami League when it is in power [2].

Outside the circles that are close to the government, some left parties sought to overcome their divisions by launching in September 2007 a national coalition, the Democratic Left Alliance, with the objective of fighting for a democratic Bangladesh and for the emergence of a credible opposition to the two principal parties which alternate in government [3]. This alliance, which consists of ten parties of the radical Left, is clearly in opposition to the political parties of the Establishment but also in opposition to the left parties which take part in government. Discussions are underway to reinforce the alliance and widen it to other opposition forces [4]. Although the parties forming the coalition can have appreciably different ideas, they agree on a minimum program which enables them to intervene on the political scene on a national level.

On the ground, in spite of its divisions and its numerical weakness, the radical Bangladeshi Left remains strong. Thanks to a long tradition of struggle, it has won mass support among workers and peasants. Most of the political parties of the radical Left have built mass organizations which have made possible the development of spectacular struggles, with significant results. For example, the CPB-ML leads the Krishok and Kishani Sabha federations, two peasant organizations which represent Via Campesina in Bangladesh and have two million members. Several political parties, such as the Revolutionary Workers' Party and the Revolutionary Democratic Party, have built trade unions in the textile industry. The parties of the radical Left have also developed work and built mass organizations aimed at students and women.

We find those mass organisations and trade unions in many of the struggles which have developed in recent years and which have met with a certain echo at the international level. In 2010 several strike waves broke out in the textile industry. This sector accounts for 80 per cent of Bangladesh's exports and employs more than three million people. The workers, mainly women, work for starvation wages in medieval conditions for Western customers, who order large quantities of textiles at low prices. Between 19 and 23 June, 2010, 800,000 workers stopped work to demand a wage increase. In July and August, nearly 700 factories were affected by strike waves, always on the question of wages. In December, new mobilizations took place to obtain the payment of the wage increase that had been won in August and had still not been paid by November. Mobilizations are severely repressed by the riot police and it is not rare for workers to be killed during them. But in spite of the repression and the intimidation of trade-union activists, the struggles remain very strong.

Other struggles, just as significant, have developed, in particular on environmental questions. For example, in the district of Phulbari, the local communities have mobilized against a project for an opencast coal mine by a company based in England, GMC Resources plc, supported by pension funds and private banking. If this project materialised, 500,000 people could be displaced and the effect on the environment would be very damaging. The mobilization has been supported by the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources and Ports (NCPOGMRP), a collective consisting of experts, researchers, political parties and individuals. This collective constitutes "a new form of socio-political movement with its working experience on national interest, especially against bad deals with the MNCs" [5]. The movement in Phulbari is unprecedented, both in the extent of the revolt and the consciousness that it has developed in the local communities. So far, it has succeeded in preventing the implementation of this project.

Peasant struggles are also particularly important. In Bangladesh, 80 per cent of the population works in the agricultural sector and 70 per cent of peasants are landless. The Krishok and Kishani Sabha federations have led big struggles for the peasants to have access to land, in particular by organizing land occupations. Since the 2000 decade, these organizations have also developed the mobilization of peasants on the questions of climate change and food sovereignty, two fundamental questions for Bangladesh, which is already affected by global warming.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] The Awami League was in the forefront of the struggle for the independence of Bangladesh. The principal pillars of the party's ideology are secularism, nationalism, socialism and democracy. In fact, the Awami League has evolved towards the centre and has actively implemented the liberal policies dictated by international organizations like the World Bank, the IMF and the Asian Development Bank.

[2] Although the Awami League has again been in power since the 2009 elections, the CPB is now in opposition. It has been replaced by the Workers' Party, which has allied itself with the Awami League by participating in a 14-party coalition.

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[4] The alliance is made up of: the Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal (BSD)- the Bangladesh Socialist Party - which is a split from the Jatio Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), one of the parties of the governing coalition; the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB-ML), a split from the Communist Party of Pakistan, formed in 1976; the Revolutionary Workers' Party, a split from the Workers' Party, the latter being at present part of the governing coalition; the Democratic Revolutionary Party, founded by the fusion between the Biplobi Oikya Front (which comes from the CPB-ML) and an underground party, the Shramajibi Mukti Andolon; the Ganosanghati Andolon, a current that comes from the Jatio Mukti Council, a split from the CPB-ML; the Jatiya Ganofront; the Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal (Mahbub), a faction of the BSD; the Bangladesher Samajtantrik Andolon; the Bangladesher Workers' Party (Pumargathito), another faction of the Workers' Party, which has recently joined the Democratic Left Alliance; and the Ganotantrik Majdur Party.

[5] 'Development', Capitalism, NGOs and People's Movements in Bangladesh: an Interview with Anu Muhammad