

A Pakistani at Liberation Museum in Dhaka

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I asked if I could have the list of the alleged war criminals of 1971war. The list names 200 Pakistani military officers and solidiers. Top of the list is Lt. Gen. Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi. There are five Major Generals (Nazar Hussain Shah, Mohhamed Hussain Insari, Mohammed Jamsheed, Qazi Abdul Majid Khan and Rao Farman Ali), 20 Brigadiers, 5 Colonels and 47 Lt. Colonels.

I was in Bangladesh May 2010. This was my second visit to the country where the word Pakistan is linked with a lot of atrocities. I visited capital Dhaka to attend a national convention against religious fundamentalism and communalism. The 'Citizen Platform' had organized this one-day convention at Institute of Engineering, Dhaka. Eighteen political parties and social movements joined hands to build the Citizen Platform, last year. The prominent constituent parties include the Awami League, Bangladesh Socialist Party (JSD), Workers Party, and Communist Party.

The main demand of this platform is to bring all those to justice who helped commit atrocities during the liberation war in 1971. This platform unites forces that oppose the religious fanatics' intervention in the affairs of the state. It mobilizes people against fundamentalism.

My local host was Tareq Ali. He is an industrialist, a board member of Liberation War Museum, and active member of the Citizen Platform. He had organized my stay at famous Dhaka Club, the oldest recreational organization and the largest of elite clubs in the town. Located near Shahbag Intersection, it is surrounded by Dhaka University, Bangladesh National Museum, Hotel Sheraton, BIRDEM Hospital, Ramna Park and the Suhrawardy Udyan. We both had a long chat before the convention. He showed me the offices of 'Citizen Platform against Terrorism and Extreme Form of Religious Fundamentalism;', as it is called, where I met the legendry leftist leader Ajoy Roy. Comrade Roy chairs the Citizen Platform.

I was struck by the political culture in Bangladesh. The convention began with a cultural show. Over 2000 delegates had arrived from all over Bangladesh. The organizers knew that delegates would not arrive at scheduled time, hence, a long wait before the convention could start. A proper seating-arrangement outside the convention center was also made. Those who came in time were not bored by delay as the excellent cultural performances, by several groups, enthralled everybody present.

The convention did not begin with the traditional reciting of Quran that has become a norm of all cultural political and religious functions in Pakistan. Instead, the convention started by a ceremony of waving of Bangladesh national flag. All the main leftist groups of Bangladesh took part proudly in this ceremony. Imagine the Pakistani leftist leaders waving Pakistani flag! The Bangladeshi flag is very strongly linked to the nationalist struggle participated by almost all the left group.

Also Bangladeshi progressive movement has very clearly separated religious connotations from their political events. Religion is not part of the political culture of Bangladesh, although, attempts have been made by Jamaat Islami Bangladesh and Bangladesh National Party of Khalida Zia to revive the Islamic trends in politics. These are very firmly opposed by the political parties and the state

institutions as well.

This convention against religious fundamentalism was taking place four months after a land mark Supreme Court ruling of Bangladesh. The Supreme Court of Bangladesh lifted a four-year stay on a ban on the “abuse of religion for political purposes” to start a slow walk back to the originally envisaged “secular Bangladesh” on 3rd January 2010.

The order marks Bangladesh’s return to its original Constitutional character, shedding its “forced identity” as a “Muslim country”, which “endeavour(s) to foster further relations amongst only Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity”.

With its decision to lift the stay, the apex court of Bangladesh endorsed the August 29, 2005 judgment of a three-judge Bench led by Justice ABM Khairul Haque which declared the Fifth Amendment to the country’s Constitution as “void ab initio and illegal”.

The Fifth Amendment had legitimized all governments that had been in power following the coup of August 15, 1975, until April 9, 1979, including the late President Zia-ur-Rehman’s ascension to the presidency. The Amendment legitimized “Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim” in the preamble of the country’s Constitution, and ratified over a hundred military proclamations and orders.

In December 2008, Awami League of Hasina Wajid won a landslide victory in the general elections and in a surprising triumph, Workers Party headed by Rashed Khan Menon and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) led by Hasanul Huq Inu secured two and three seats respectively in this election. In the eighth parliament, both parties had no representation.

Noted educationists and economists Kabir Chowdhury, Anisuzzaman, Abul Barakat, Mosharraf Hossain, Workers’ Party President Rashed Khan Menon, Ganotantrik Party President Nurul Rahman Selim, Bangladesh Tarikat Federation President Syed Nazibul Bashar Maizbhandari, Gono Forum leader SM Altaf Hossain, writer Masuda Bhatti, Executive Director of Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha Rokeya Kabir also addressed the convention, chaired by Prof Ajoy Roy.

The main speaker of the convention was general secretary of Awami League and Local Government Regional Development and Cooperatives Minister Syed Ashraful Islam. Two of us from outside Bangladesh were also the key speakers at the convention.

This convention also got more importance as the Awami League has not yet taken any steps to consolidate the decision of the Supreme Court regarding the separation of religion from politics.

Syed Ashraful Islam told the convention that the government would soon place a bill in parliament to restore the original constitution of 1972. “The constitution of 1972 can only be reinstated in the parliament, not through High Court or Supreme Court verdicts,” he said.

He said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had expressed her determination to restore the original constitution of 1972. He alleged that a vested quarter wrote to lawmakers and policymakers of different countries including the USA and the UK regarding the war crimes trial to mislead them.

After the convention, I had a chance to visit the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka. The Liberation War Museum is located in the centre of Dhaka city and was inaugurated on March 22, 1996. Over the last 13 years, the museum has received 428, 629 visits. There are six galleries displaying the protracted struggle of the people of Bangladesh for establishing their identity as a nation under the British regime as well as their struggle for democracy, political and economic emancipation 1947 onwards and finally their armed struggle during the nine-month-long War of Liberation in 1971. The Liberation War Museum is outcome of citizen’s effort and is run by a Board of Trustee. It is now

recognized, nationally and internationally, as credible institution on history of Bangladesh independence.

I asked Tareq Ali if I could have the list of the alleged war criminals of 1971 war. He sent me a scanned copy of original list. The list names 200 Pakistani military officers and solidiers. Top of the list is Lt. Gen. Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi. There are five Major Generals (Nazar Hussain Shah, Mohhamed Hussain Insari, Mohammed Jamsheed, Qazi Abdul Majid Khan and Rao Farman Ali), 20 Brigadiers, 5 Colonels and 47 Lt. Colonels.

Although the word 'genocide' was and is still used frequently amongst observers and scholars of the events that transpired during the 1971 war, the allegations that a genocide took place during the Bangladesh War of 1971 were never investigated by an international tribunal set up under the auspices of the United Nations, due to complications arising from the Cold War. A process is underway to begin trials of some local war collaborators by the present Awami League government.

Different figures are presented in Bangladesh about the civilian and military causalities during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. It is said that widespread atrocities were committed against the Bengali population of the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), claiming one-to-three million lives. 'Genocide' is the term that is used to describe the event by almost every major publication and newspaper.

The number of civilians that died in the liberation war of Bangladesh is not known in any reliable documentation. There has been a great disparity in the casualty figures put forth by Pakistan on one hand (26,000, as reported in in the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report) and India and Bangladesh on the other hand (From 1972 to 1975 the first post-war prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, estimated that 3 million died). This is the figure officially maintained by the Government of Bangladesh. Most scholarship on the topic estimate the number killed to be between 1 and 3 million. A further eight to ten million people fled the country to seek safety in India.

The minorities of Bangladesh, especially the Hindus, were specific targets of the Pakistan army. Numerous East Pakistani women were tortured, raped and killed during the war. Bangladeshi sources cite a figure of 200,000 women raped, giving birth to thousands of war-babies. Pakistani sources claim the number is much lower, though having not completely denied rape incidents.

During the war, it is been alleged that the Pakistan Army and its local supporters carried out a systematic execution of the leading Bengali intellectuals. A number of university professors from Dhaka University were killed during the first few days of the war. However, the most extreme cases of targeted killing of intellectuals took place during the last few days of the war. On December 14, 1971, only two days before surrendering to the Indian military and the Mukhti Bahini forces, the Pakistani army - with the assistance of the Al Badr and Al Shams - systematically executed well over 200 of East Pakistan's intellectuals and scholars.

I had several discussions with the Bengali left activists and leaders during my two-day stay. We agreed to forge close links between the progressive forces of Pakistan and Bangladesh. When I told the convention that I come from a group that were opposed to the war in Bangladesh and that some of our leaders and activists from left trends dared to demonstrate in Lahore against Pakistan army atrocities, I got a tremendous applause from over 2000 charged audience.

When I mentioned the name of one proud participant of this demonstration in Lahore Tahira Mazhar Ali Khan during 1971 war, it was again applauded loudly by the audiences which were mainly young activists from 20 different districts of Bangladesh who had travelled overnight to come to this convention. It was encouraging but on my return to Lahore, I was haunted by images from

Liberation Museum. Faiz was coming to my mind:

Khun kay dhabay dhulain gay kitni barsatoo'N kay baa'd.

Farooq Tariq

P.S.

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<http://www.viewpointonline.net/a-pakistani-at-liberation-museum.html>

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