

Bengal 1971: Revolution, War and Defeat - The global framework

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Forty-four years ago, on December 16 and 17, 1971, Dhaka fell and Pakistan's army surrendered East Pakistan in a humiliating defeat. Lieutenant General A A K Niazi, the martial law administrator of East Pakistan, surrendered to Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora, the joint commander of the Bangladesh-India allied forces. Air Commodore A K Khandker acted as witness on behalf of the Bangladeshi armed forces. The Instrument of Surrender document signed in recognition of the defeat and transfer of power read as follows: "The Pakistan Eastern Command agrees to surrender all Pakistan armed forces in Bangladesh to Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora, General Officer Commanding in Chief of Indian forces in the Eastern Theatre..." Subsequently, around 93,000 Pakistani troops and officials were taken as prisoners-of-war by the Indian army, the largest number of prisoners of war (POWs) since World War II.

Thousands of people celebrated at the ceremony in central Dhaka marking the liberation of Bangladesh and the victory in the civil war that began on March 25, 1971. In India there were triumphant exaltations amongst the ruling classes and the military's top brass. Some generals wanted to "finish off Pakistan" and have the next day's lunch in the grandeur of the Lahore Gymkhana club located in Lawrence Gardens in pre-partition Lahore, so legendary for its sumptuous food and opulent parties amongst the subcontinent's elites. However, Indira Gandhi was too crafty and cunning to have committed such a blunder that would have provoked another revolutionary upheaval leading to the overthrow of the edifice of the rulership of her class. As is usually the case, revolution erupts in the aftermath of war. She saved the system but just months after this 'historic victory' there was a revolt of the Indian proletariat that ultimately led to her overthrow. Indira the 'goddess of war' and the victorious heroine of 1971 did save capitalism by this war strategy but had to part with her regime.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, a sombre state set in with the oppressed masses utterly confused and bewildered in the aftermath of the gigantic events that had triggered the unprecedented turbulence of war, revolution and counter-revolution. Apart from the military strategies and other blatant mistakes of West Pakistan's ruling classes, the debate in Pakistan mainly focuses on episodic and superficial features of the defeat. Whilst it is true that the end of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh once more brought into question the relevance and validity of the Two Nation Theory, nevertheless an examination from the people's perspective or a class analysis remains rare. In reality, the war, repression, genocide and defeat with the separation of East Bengal were part of another strategy of imperialism and the ruling classes of India and Pakistan to divert, distract, derail and defeat the revolution of 1968-1969. During these 139 days the ordinary masses of Pakistan from Peshawar to Chittagong were, for the first time, united on a class basis, the only real and genuine bondage to unite and fight for their collective emancipation. The break up of Pakistan also unambiguously demonstrates how world imperialism and the national bourgeoisie will go to calamitous extremes to preserve the rule of their system of capitalist exploitation.

History witnessed in those testing times the occupations of factories by the workers, the seizure of land by poor peasants, the awakening of women and the valour of the students and youth, which fed into a revolutionary situation in both East and West Pakistan. The delay in the revolution diverted

the movement on class struggle along national lines particularly in East Bengal. It was the disastrous role of the left leaders in East Bengal that led to this disastrous nationalist digression of the social revolution. The Indian and world powers catapulted Mujib to the helm instigating a ferocious civil war and the separation of Bangladesh. However, in the aftermath of the Pakistani army's surrender in December 1971, a new conflict began in Bangladesh. In the areas lost by the Pakistani army in East Bengal during the national liberation struggle, a form of Soviet situation developed. The invading Indian army in connivance with the reactionary bourgeois nationalist forces of East Bengal brutally crushed them.

The seventh fleet of the US Navy was anchored in the Bay of Bengal with marines on board. American imperialists feared that the Indian army would fail to crush the Soviets that were mainly controlled by the socialist Jatyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD). Had the social revolution succeeded in East Bengal, its prevention of spreading into West Bengal already in ferment would have been next to impossible. In the post-war, crisis-ridden subcontinent, a red, united Bengal with its traditions of uprisings would have set revolutions alight throughout the region. Its impacts would have had devastating repercussions for imperialism on a world scale. The Indian bourgeois state ensured that Bengal remained divided mainly on a religious basis.

In West Pakistan, the defeated, humiliated and shattered Pakistani army was in no state to resist a new mass uprising. There were revolts in several garrisons and General Gul Hassan rushed from one cantonment to another to quell these rebellious young officers and ranks. Bhutto, now in power, announced radical reforms calculated to defuse any new upsurge but he was destined ultimately to failure due to the burgeoning crisis of Pakistani capitalism.

Pakistan was created not as a nation state but as a state comprising of several nations. This is crystal clear from the alphabets that its name is made up of. The nascent Muslim capitalist class failed to create the modern industrialised state and society it had promised. They got their independent market but, due to their economic and technological incapacity, failed to complete the task of creating a new nation. National exploitation continued along with crushing class coercion. Ultimately, the explosion of class contradictions in 1968 led to a mass revolutionary upheaval. A Leninist party could have led the revolution to a socialist victory.

However, Bangladesh's national liberation has failed to unite Bengal and resolve the basic socio-economic problems of the oppressed masses. Ever since, the conditions of the workers and the youth under capitalist exploitation in Bangladesh and Pakistan have only worsened. The elite's intelligentsia repeats the same old rhetoric of shallow patriotism and hollow sovereignty. Class and national oppression with excruciating deprivation and misery are traumatising societies. Massive upheavals and gigantic events impend on the horizon. The most important lesson to be learnt from December 1971 is to unite and take the class struggle to its finish. The genuine movements of national liberation have to be supported and linked to the revolutionary class struggle to overthrow this vicious system. In East Bengal, this failed to take place due to the absence of a Marxist leadership. In Pakistan, another 1968-1969 can emerge on a higher plane. Its victory on a socialist basis will begin the process of abolition of poverty and suffering of almost one fourth of the human race that inhabits South Asia.

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* "Bengal 1971: Revolution, War and Defeat". December 19, 2015:
<http://www.marxistreview.asia/bengal-1971-revolution-war-and-defeat/>