

Bangladesh 1971 Civil War: Past Haunts the Future

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Ever since a recently established war crimes tribunal came to the verdict of a life sentence against the Jamaat-a-Islami chief, Abdul Qadir Mullah, on 5th of February for crimes against humanity during the civil war in 1971, Bangladesh has been embroiled in clashes and unrest in which several people have been killed and wounded.

This turmoil comes against the background of innumerable general strikes and militant protests of workers in the last few years. In recent months scores of textile workers, mainly women, have been burned to death in factory fires in the garment industry that is the main source of Bangladesh's exports and the main part of its economy.

In the 1971 war, after which an independent Bangladesh came into being, about three million were killed according to the government and tens of thousands of Bengali women were raped by soldiers of the West Pakistani army that was trying to crush a mass revolt in East Pakistan, as it was known at the time. In December the Indian army invaded East Pakistan and after a 13-day war the Pakistani army surrendered and ninety three thousand personnel were taken as prisoners of war.

East Bengal was liberated and Bangladesh came into being as an independent state. This version of those turbulent events forty two years ago is the official line of the Indian and the Bangladeshi ruling classes and their intelligentsia. The Pakistani state version is based on the usual portrayal of India as being the perpetrator of the conflict and the cause of the breakup of Pakistan.

However, both versions have been distorted to serve the interests of the ruling elites. History has been skewed and as in every war truth is the victim. The movement that erupted against the regime in the united Pakistan began not in East Pakistan but in Rawalpindi, a garrison town in West Pakistan, when a student of the polytechnic college on its outskirts was killed by police firing on a protest demonstration of the students. This provoked a mass upheaval that spread throughout both wings of the country, East and West Pakistan. It soon developed into a class struggle with revolutionary politics and socialist ideals dominating the uprising.

In East Pakistan the main leader that emerged in this movement was Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bashani, a Maoist, who was the leader of the National Awami party. As the movement became stronger with the involvement of the proletariat and began to threaten the regime, the state apparatus and the system, Bashani was instructed by Mao himself, a close friend of the Pakistani military ruler Ayub Khan, to back out.

This abdication of Bashani, who was calling for a socialist revolution, was a severe setback for the class struggle. However, there was also a severe national oppression being perpetrated onto the Bengali masses and sentiments of being denied opportunities for nationalist aspirations were widespread. This led to the deviation of the struggle from class lines onto nationalist ones. Imperialists and the Indian ruling classes heaved a sigh of relief as they were terrified that the

mighty wave of the class struggle that was developing in East Pakistan would spill over into the state of West Bengal in India, a state that was already in ferment.

Such a development would have meant a revolutionary wave engulfing the whole of the south Asian subcontinent. This propelled Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a bourgeoisie demagogue, into the leadership of the nationalist struggle. He was a staunch adherent of capitalism and had links with the Indian bourgeoisie. In a revealingly frank interview with AFP published in *Le Monde*, Paris on 31st March 1971 Mujib complained, "Is the West Pakistan government not aware that I am the only one able to save East Pakistan from communism?"

The Indian army invaded East Bengal not really to defeat the Pakistan army but in fact to crush the soviets or the Panchayats of the workers, peasants and youth that had sprung up in the areas liberated by the mass struggle under the leadership of the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) and other left organisations and which threatened the status quo. But what is also true is that in the atrocities and massacres of the Bengali masses committed by the Pakistani Army, the vigilantes of the Jamaat-a-Islami, organised in its armed wings of Al Badar and Al Shams, were accomplices and carried out vicious brutalities against innocent people.

The deep involvement of the Jamaat in this 'Operation Blitz' of the Pakistan army is revealed in the book 'The Indo-Pak War' by Major General Hakeem Arshad Qureshi, who was a battalion commander in the Dinapur district of East Pakistan during the operation. He narrates, "Maulana Tufail Mohammad (Amir) of the Jamaat-a-Islami visited us after the military action...The Maulana was particularly concerned about the performance of the 'Razakars'(volunteers) locally recruited and belonging to his party... He jokingly remarked that his party cadres had always come to the rescue of the Army in tough situations."

There is no doubt that these leaders of the Jamaat-a-Islami now being tried in the war crimes tribunal were involved in the heinous crimes against the Bengali masses in the war of liberation. But the question arises as to why these trials are being conducted forty two years after the crimes were committed. In addition, we might also ask why the Jamaat is still a substantial political force in Bangladesh when its leaders played such a treacherous role during its independence struggle.

In spite of a secular constitution and the demeanour of its mainstream leaders, the independence of Bangladesh has failed to alleviate the masses from deprivation, misery and poverty under a capitalist regime. Both the mainstream parties represent the interests of the Bengali ruling classes that took control of the state and the economy after the creation of Bangladesh.

It also proves that any independence on a bourgeois basis cannot resolve the burning problems afflicting society due to capitalist exploitation and imperialist plunder. Fundamentalism breeds in this malaise that has set in due to the stagnation of the movement and the misery that prevails in society. Those tens of thousands protesting in the Shahbagh square are mainly the petit bourgeoisie who are expressing their frustration with the burgeoning social and economic crisis that has now started to bite even the middle classes. Those who are ferociously belligerent for the utopia of Islamisation are from a similar class background with almost the same frustration with their lives in this system in decay.

It is unfortunate that most of the left leadership, in the name of secularism and democracy, have abandoned the urgent need for a socio economic transformation in order to achieve the emancipation of the Bengali masses. Over the past four decades the youth and proletariat in Bangladesh have launched several struggles and fought many battles to overthrow this exploitation. What they lack, however, is a revolutionary programme, party and leadership to achieve the real social and economic liberation they so earnestly seek.

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P.S.

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