

Is a Left-Wing Nationalism Possible in Bangladesh?

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The 2013 Shahbagh movement offers a critical context for reading the contested histories, paradoxes, and possibilities of left-wing nationalism in Bangladesh's semi-centennial year.

Commemorating victims in lieu of remembering revolutionaries, seeking retribution and reconciliation rather than redistribution, writing histories of wars and genocides rather than mass struggles – such projects have become dominant in organizing the historical memory of the political left.

The word 'revolution' itself has been a casualty since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This term now invokes cataclysmic defeats, totalitarianism, and outright cynicism rather than principles of hope or a genealogy for ongoing political struggles. Yet, there are moments when such '[left-wing melancholia](#)' comes to terms with its own dilemmas and helps place past revolutionary possibilities in a new light.

In this essay, I look at the Shahbagh movement that swept across Bangladesh in early 2013 as one such watershed moment. The movement fueled a growing interest in revisiting and revisioning the role of left politics during the ascendant years of Bengali nationalism. It provided an opportunity to imagine contemporary nationalist politics differently. I examine this event in relation to Mohiuddin Ahmad's widely read account of the left-wing of the Awami League's student organization during the 'long 1970s', an organization which eventually reconstituted itself as a democratic socialist party in 1972. Fifty years since the realization of a tortuous path to postcolonial nationhood, Ahmad's intervention compels us to reexamine whether and how 'Bangladesh' might still signify struggles for substantive equality and justice, struggles within which a left-wing of nationalist political praxis was once at the forefront.

Ahmad's prolific oeuvre in the historiography of Bangladesh's politics has become popular in recent years. While faithful to the historian's craft of meticulously (de)constructing and triangulating archival and oral evidence, Ahmad's writings carry an acute sensibility towards his subject matter and its real implications for contemporary party politics in Bangladesh. I draw on fragments from his well-known work on the origins of the Socialist Party of Bangladesh to (a) highlight a longstanding 'left-wing' strain in Bengali nationalism, and (b) examine the continuing salience of this strain in laying out the contours of the contemporary crisis in democratic and left-socialist politics in Bangladesh.

II

In February 2013, massive crowds gathered in Dhaka's Shahbagh square demanding capital punishment for Abdul Qader Mollah. A *Jamaat-e-Islami* politician known as *Mirpurur koshai* or 'the butcher of Mirpur', Mollah had been sentenced to life for collaborating with West Pakistani forces and abetting the murder of unarmed civilians during 1971. Legal proceedings against high profile

war criminals, many of whom were part of the *Jamaat* leadership, had begun in 2012 under a tribunal set up by Sheikh Hasina's Awami League (AL) government. A decade-long civil society [effort](#) for such trials finally paid off when the AL accorded the issue a priority in its 2009 electoral mandate. When Mollah was given a life sentence by the tribunal, students, workers, and middle-class professionals, who saw the verdict as too lenient, took to the streets demanding the death penalty. The protestors suspected that political opportunism was once again at play, compromising the tribunal's judicial integrity. Yet, the irony of clamoring for the death penalty by the very people who were reclaiming a nationalist spirit that prided itself on its inclusive and liberal democratic credentials [hung heavily](#) in the air. Divorced from a redistributive ethos and paving over internal differences in defining [popular sovereignty](#), the protesters' purely retributive demand revealed a 'field of ruins' – a field of political experience where societal change [can no longer be imagined](#) in terms of class interests and aspirations 'from below.'

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A reason for this is the [expedient alliances](#) between anti-liberation right-wing groups like the *Jamaat* and center-left nationalist forces since the mid-1970s. Ruling elites across the political spectrum have since deployed a hollowed out 'consciousness of the liberation war' or *muktijuddher chetona* to legitimize their blatant pursuit of economic and political power in the name of national development. They have erased the growing political marginalization and material insecurities of the country's poor and working classes from such consciousness, often ironically in the guise of [serving](#) these marginalized populations. The pursuit of economic growth at all costs via neoliberal development and elite scramble for power and wealth have normalized this erasure, and the [kinds of dispossession](#) it legitimates. Meanwhile, new forms of socio-economic inequalities and deprivation have intensified episodic and everyday discontent among poor and indigenous peasants, informal workers, students, and a growing precariat, many of whom were among the supporters of Shahbagh.

Shahbagh's tragedy, however, is not that its momentum was '[hijacked](#)' by the same politics of expediency and opportunism that the protesters were mobilizing against. Sure, the AL used Shahbagh's momentum to gain a second term in power when its main rival, *Jamaat* ally Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), boycotted the 2014 elections in the hopes of annulling the election's legitimacy. While the BNP languished in its miscalculation of Shahbagh's momentum, the AL went about its business by [clamping down](#) on protest. The real tragedy of Shahbagh is that its demands could not broach the current party-state's prerogative of mobilizing the 'consciousness of the liberation war' (*muktijuddher chetona*) to legitimize structural inequalities in the exercise of class power.

Furthermore, Shahbagh's tragedy has been compounded by the organized reaction of the far right. In early May 2013, a loose coalition of [qawmi](#) madrassa leaders marched thousands of their students to Dhaka under the banner of *Hefajat-e-Islam* ('In Service of Islam'). Opposing the ethos of Shahbagh, the marchers demanded a blasphemy law and punishment of 'atheist bloggers.' From then on, several bloggers and secular public intellectuals supporting Shahbagh were brutally [assassinated](#) by Islamic fundamentalists in broad daylight. The Hefajat reaction has subsequently become part of the political [mainstream](#), riding a complex socio-historical [undercurrent](#). This is clear from the AL government's ongoing actions vis-à-vis Hefajat. While the party-state was heavy-handed in clamping down on the Hefajat marchers, it dragged its feet into investigating the killings of bloggers. Moreover, the AL has since wooed the Hefajat leadership under the guise of a [technocratic discourse](#) of 'mainstreaming' *qawmi* madrassa education.

Since the competition for political ground remains within a hegemonic, imagined community of the

nation in Bangladesh, Hefajat's discourse must speak to and for the people-nation, even as its brand of politics rides a global 'double wave'. On the one hand, it draws on the transnational appeal of Muslim victimhood, often attracting [influential bedfellows](#) peddling liberal values and human rights. On the other hand, its neo-conservative rhetoric of religious revivalism hardly antagonizes capitalist practices, while fueling a right-wing authoritarian reaction to neoliberal globalization. The effect is predictable and disconcerting – societal problems are blamed on atheist bloggers, foreign/secularist NGO members, and their propagation of 'alien cultures' masquerading as women's rights and free speech, and so on. Calls for the violent excising of such figures from the national body constitute the ethical-moral grounds within which Hefajat's constituency thrives.

For Shahbagh, such violent excision demanding death sentences for *razakars* (local collaborators assisting occupying forces in '71) poses a different kind of difficulty. Following [Ranabir Samaddar](#), the antagonism between democratic aspirations of nation-building and the techno-political terrain of state-making is a useful starting point for articulating this difficulty. State formation is historically entwined with the imperatives of the world market, i.e., the political economic domain of global capitalism and its class dynamics. The example of the Pakistan movement during the early 1940s is illustrative here. Promises of crop price stability, debt relief, and an end to violent policing [mobilized](#) the democratic aspirations of an immiserated Bengali-Muslim peasantry who made up much of the region's population. However, such aspirations soon [clashed](#) with the prerogatives of the post-colonial state. As metropolitan capital and a military-bureaucratic [elite](#) concurred on the rapid development of modern infrastructure and industry, peasant agriculture remained the primary source of surplus extraction. With economic and central administrative power located in West Pakistan after partition (and there, too, distributed [unevenly](#)), such class and sectoral imbalances were politicized in terms of [regional disparities](#).

In what was then East Pakistan, this clash led to the end of Muslim League hegemony and the rise of regional parties like the AL among the Bengali Muslim '[intermediate classes](#).' Despite crucial differences between the 1940s and 60s in terms of the conjunctural forces and political actors involved, both moments imbued nationalism in the region with a normative commitment towards the devolution of political and economic power through democratic means. These moments carried what we might call a 'left-wing strain' of nationalism. In the current conjuncture, Shahbagh signifies a missed opportunity for foregrounding such a strain via redistributive rather than retributive justice.

Nevertheless, the movement's negative demands and critique of the political opportunism of ruling elites ignited an intergenerational conversation. Mohiuddin Ahmad's works need to be read in this context. His writings on *Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal* (Socialist Party of Bangladesh, Bengali acronym, *Jashod*), the most influential political force carrying this 'left-wing strain' during the long 1970s, preceded Shahbagh by three decades. In 2014, the catalytic moment of Shahbagh generated interest in his book [Jashoder Uttan Pothon: Osthir Shomoyer Rajniti](#) (JUP, or *Rise and Fall of the Socialist Party of Bangladesh: Politics in Troubled Times*), among a [new generation](#) of students, scholars, and activists. It is within this context that I turn to the content of JUP and examine how Ahmad historicizes the role of the 'left-wing' strain in nationalist politics.

III

By 2014, the Socialist Party of Bangladesh was already split into various factions. Despite differences, all factions have lent varying degrees of support to a neoliberal development agenda since the 1980s. The leader of one faction currently holds a ministerial portfolio in the AL-led government. Nevertheless, Jashod's factions are minor 'satellite' parties today with fragmented electoral constituencies. This is consistent with the dominant trend in Bangladesh's party politics, where smaller parties flock to coalitions headed by the two major parties and use defection as a bargaining chip.

Cutting through this contemporary thicket of political opportunism, Ahmad draws our attention to another history of the socialist party. Ahmad was an early staff member of a daily newspaper that became *Jashod*'s mouthpiece after the party's founding in 1972. The party drew its early members from the AL's student wing, mainly among the urban-educated middle classes. It emerged in response to the growing corruption and failures of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government in rehabilitating a war-devasted populace and fulfilling nationalist aspirations for a secular, democratic and socialist society.

The broad trajectory of Jashod's politics since its founding is well-known. The party saw dramatic growth through the induction of dedicated cadre who mobilized both urban and rural bases within a short period of time. Jashod gained parliamentary presence in 1973 despite adverse electoral circumstances. It faced repression by Mujib's praetorian forces and went through further radicalization, incorporating leftist outfits with conflicting agendas. Its role in setting the context for the military coups and countercoups following the brutal 1975 assassinations of Mujib, most of his family and close aides has been a source of vitriolic debate and political animosities since. The party faced further repression under subsequent military regimes. Factionalism and political oblivion loomed large for the party by the late 1980s. In addition to telling us this story, Ahmad offers valuable insights on *why* this trajectory played out the way it did through a carefully constructed *histoire événementielle*, from the party's 'pre-history' in the 1960s to the tumultuous decade of its rise and fall during the long 1970s. Ahmad's broader objective is to redress misrepresentations of left politics in independent Bangladesh and its longer legacy within anti-colonial nationalism, a task which remains both politically fraught and historically [challenging](#).

Given this present context, Ahmad's work is compelled by a need for developing an 'objective distance' from the political events he witnessed and participated in. At the same time, his work exudes a profoundly personal involvement. Ahmad's erstwhile involvement in the political organization he writes about, and the relationships of trust built therein, are evident both from the source materials he collates and the way he presents them. What emerges is a rich historical account of the socialist party and its antecedents within the nationalist movement 'from below', drawing on many new and hitherto unpublicized sources and personal archives, including unofficial pamphlets, declarations, manifestos, and first-hand accounts of clandestine meetings and correspondences among key party members.

IV

Ahmad traces the left-wing strain of Bengali nationalism to a 'precursor' organization of Jashod – the *Swadhin Bangla Biplobi Parishad* (Revolutionary Council of Liberated Bengal). The Parishad was established in 1962 by student leaders Serajul Alam Khan, Abdur Razzak, and Kazi Aref. With national liberation as their objective, the Parishad paved a new political terrain by actively involving the AL's student wing, the Chattra League (CL), as well as the leftist Student Union at Dhaka University, in the cause of national independence for East Pakistan. By 1964, the Parishad had vastly expanded its activities, ranging from publishing a regular bulletin to the active recruitment of leaders and cadres within CL chapters across the country. Mujib was made aware of the Parishad's activities as early as 1966, but only came to know the extent of their organizational reach in 1969. Ahmad shows that Mujib's hardening stance on the '[six-point program](#)' for regional autonomy, following the success of the anti-Ayub [uprisings](#), largely depended on the political-ideological and organizational strength established by the Parishad.

In 1971, the Parishad's decade-long vision was vindicated when the Yahya regime dissolved Pakistan's parliament, arrested Mujib, and initiated a brutal military crackdown. During the war, the Parishad leadership was united in raising a guerrilla contingent (named 'Bangladesh Liberation Force' later, *Mujib Bahini*) with assistance from Indian border security and intelligence services.

However, they saw this as a secondary task, since the Parishad was first and foremost a political force tasked by Mujib himself with directing the liberation struggle. Their political objective during '71 was to keep the 'Naxalites' or pro-Peking communist groups from gaining the upper hand, given the latter's pre-71 opposition to the six-point program and the primacy of the Bengali national question. This became a major source of contention. The armed strength of the liberation struggle rested mainly with the thousands of Bengali soldiers who had defected from the Pakistan army during the early days of the war. For the most part, they were organized by the government-in-exile established under Delhi's auspices, headed by senior AL leaders like Tajuddin Ahmed in the absence of Mujib, who was incarcerated in West Pakistan for the duration of the war. A conflict emerged between the Parishad's leadership and Tajuddin's government-in-exile over the latter's tacit approval of the armed training of communist groups for guerilla warfare, including the pro-Peking ones. The rift was especially vehement between Tajuddin Ahmed and Mujibur Rahman's nephew Sheikh Moni, who had joined the Parishad's leadership in 1969 despite harboring strong anti-left leanings.

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The organizing work done within the CL by Parishad leaders like Serajul Alam Khan began to pay political dividends post-1971. With the national question resolved, the CL, under popular left-leaning leaders like Khan, articulated an increasingly radical aspiration for social transformation. One of Ahmad's most valuable contributions is his account of the socio-political conditions that led to a further radicalization of left politics. By the late 1960s, both fringe and mainstream communist groups had succumbed to [factionalism](#) in the context of Cold War geopolitical realignments. While pro-Moscow groups like Moni Singh's Communist Party of Bangladesh aligned with the AL's agenda, many pro-Peking groups worked against Bengali nationalism and were thus seen as abetting the West Pakistani establishment's dominance. The Parishad had carved out an alternate arena of left politics, based on an innovative assessment of regional conditions and possibilities for a revolutionary socialist program via the nationalist route. This appealed to many and allowed the Parishad to deploy the CL in expanding its organizational reach into left-leaning constituencies beyond the urban intermediate classes. Inspired by the romanticism of the Cuban Revolution and earlier Bengali revolutionary, anti-colonial organizations like the [Anushilan Samiti](#), the Parishad's lasting strengths lay in its non-dogmatic posture in matters of political ideology, and democratic practices in the conduct of its organizational activities.

While Mujib was sympathetic to the radical '15-point program' that Khan presented to him in early 1972, he could not bring his party together to agree on it. Thus, the stage was set for Jashod, and a party platform was organized over the next few months under the guidance of Khan, MA Jalil, and others. The new party received tacit endorsement from Tajuddin, who nevertheless decided to stay on in Mujib's AL. Jashod's program was officially announced on October 31, 1972. It called for a “scientific socialist revolution” in terms that were consistent with the earlier 15-point program. The latter had called for workers' management of public sector enterprises and private industries abandoned by West Pakistani capital, alongside the overhaul of administrative and policing apparatuses of the state. Jashod's manifesto added a non-aligned foreign policy and called for ending communal-religious sectarianism in Bengali nationalist politics. Again, as Ahmad indicates, these proposals had real traction given grassroots conditions at that time. Over the next few years, Jashod developed a sizeable political constituency largely assisted by the debacle of the AL-led government.

Contrary to narratives that paint Jashod as an authoritarian party deploying terrorist tactics, Ahmad shows that its involvement in political violence was a response to the ruling party-state's repression. Moreover, he argues that authoritarian tendencies were imported by groups with little experience and desire for democratic forms of political organizing. Tensions between AL and Jashod escalated

after the reins of a paramilitary force created by Mujib fell into the hands of Sheikh Moni. The violence and repression unleashed by this militia on opposition leaders and activists led to the formation of Jashod's armed wing, the *Gonobahini*. While the *Gonobahini* retaliated in measure, the combination of state and paramilitary forces eventually shifted the balance against them. In this context, the 1973 elections brought the AL back to power even as Mujib's popularity plummeted. He failed to rein in the killings and kidnappings of opposition leaders and activists by AL cadres, and to prevent the latter's mismanagement and looting of nationalized industries and public sector enterprises. Such practices, including kickbacks from state contracts as well as smuggling and hoarding of food grains, reached egregious proportions during a severe food crisis in 1974.

Meanwhile, with the Parishad's anti-communist sensibilities quelled, Jashod emerged as a rallying ground for a broad left coalition. In retrospect, this did not help Jashod since it attracted groups and personalities with little interest in democratic politics. An important example which Ahmad highlights is the relationship between Jashod and the *Biplobi Sainik Shongstha* (BSS, or Revolutionary Soldiers' Council). The BSS was led by non-commissioned officers, ex-freedom fighters, and soldiers within the newly formed Bangladesh army, including leaders like the retired colonel Abu Taher. They aimed their ire at the repatriated Bengali officers from Pakistan, who in turn detested the inclusion of ex-guerrilla fighters in the armed forces. While the BSS's 'trade union-like' demands calling for better pay and work conditions were reasonable, its members were not equipped for the kind of long-drawn struggle required for creating a 'peoples' army.' This became apparent in Taher's unilateral decisions following the assassination of Mujib (by a clique of junior officers within the armed forces), and his failed gamble to secure state power during the November 7 uprising in 1975.

V

Ahmad largely succeeds in presenting a vivid account of the relationships, conjunctural tensions, and tragedies shaping a left-wing strain of Bengali nationalism during the long 1970s. The organization of a democratic socialist party, foregrounding the constituent interests of working populations in the imaginary of the people-nation post-1971, was a high point for such a strain. This is substantiated by Ahmad through his meticulous recounting of the names of party activists and leaders, many from working-class, peasant, and lower-middle-class backgrounds, who were involved in important party decisions and shaped crucial events. In his book (JUP), Ahmad thus describes a political organization that drew its strength not so much from an enlightened leadership, but through active participation and support 'from below.' Its descriptive richness aside, however, JUP does not broach Jashod's tragic debacle in terms of a deeper tension facing left-wing political projects bound by global prerogatives in the modern world of capital. For [Alain Badiou](#), this is "a fundamental tension between the nonstate, even anti-state, character of a politics of emancipation and the statist character of the victory and duration of that politics." It is of course another way of talking about the ambiguity Samaddar notices in (Bengali) nationalism, grounded in a tension between the ethical-moral pull of the people-nation, and the exceptions to it that push the norms of state-making.

In today's Bangladesh, as a party-state consolidates the interests of global and local capital, and as an expanding network of NGOs and local bureaucracies contain the fallout of such consolidation on the poor and working classes, this left-wing strain of nationalism appears as a distant, forgotten relic. However disfigured and distanced, the popular cross-class mobilization of Shahbagh carried beneath its surface a deep discontent with politics as usual, a discontent immanent to such a strain. Insofar as the movement's aftermath encourages a new generation to rediscover the legacies of left politics within Bengali nationalism, and to desire political futures beyond the status quo ante of a waning neoliberalism, a different lineage of emancipatory struggles calling for economic justice and social equality remains alive. The moral, intellectual, and political struggles entailed in

foregrounding this lineage is an uphill task, as the right-wing opposition to Shahbagh and its accommodations by an increasingly authoritarian party-state amply demonstrates. Ahmad's stock-taking efforts to set Jashod's historical record straight is timely in such a context.

Mushahid Hussain is a writer and researcher currently pursuing a PhD in historical sociology at Cornell University, New York.

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