

Cracks in the Powerbrokers

Contributed by Terrence Frazer
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"Bangladesh's caretaker government is facing a grave crisis. Its actions, especially the politicized cleanup and the violation of human rights, have come back to haunt it, driving discontent in two of its major support bases: foreign diplomats and the local media. The balance of its third support base, the middle and low-income classes, now hangs delicately in the consequences of the its economic (mis)management." (Photos by Mikey Leung)

For the first time since 1/11, Bangladesh's caretaker government (CTG) is facing a crisis. Politicians are still leashed and jailed, and guns still dictate the terms, so the threat is not from any mass movement—at least not yet. It is in the rising discontent in two of its major support bases: foreign diplomats and the local media. United earlier, foreign powers now have significant divisions. And timid earlier, the local media is getting increasingly vocal. Episode 1. The foreigners unite

Prior to 1/11, foreign diplomats had already been flurrying back and forth between the political parties, trying to offer various solutions to the impasse. Most prominent among them were the US Ambassador and the British High Commissioner, with EU representatives and the Tuesday Club (the informal grouping of Western diplomats) closely in their heels.

Solutions offered by them included ideas from setting up another caretaker government to elections organized and supervised by the UN. Some of these ideas were publicly declared, others offered secretly. But within some circles, rumours were already going on about a 'minus-two' plan, though some diplomats were against it.

But the coup happened anyway, sanctioned by exasperated Western diplomats. But it was a highly sophisticated, face-saving version. At first, the international response was overwhelming. It's probably not an exaggeration to say that at no time in Bangladesh's history was the outside world so thoroughly unified in support of a government as it was right after 1/11, 2007. Episode 2. The local media wilts

While the local media failed to see through the smoke and mirrors, one international magazine, The Economist, went ahead to call a spade a spade. Starting with an article published on January 18 titled 'The coup that dare not speak its name,' the magazine began to argue that Bangladesh basically underwent a military takeover. The local media criticized the report at that time, and some compared it to the type of sensationalist articles about the 'Talebanization' of Bangladesh that had appeared a few years ago in Far Eastern Economic Review and The Wall Street Journal.

Since then, it is The Economist's reporting that has proven to be right. Apart from peddling sensationalism, the local media (with exceptions) became embroiled in trying to carve out a third political force. The only newspaper consistently critical of authoritarianism and forced political reforms, and arguing strongly for a quick return to democracy was the New Age.

At times when other papers, like The Daily Star, would veer 'off-course' by overtly criticizing the government's actions, they would be promptly disciplined through carrots and sticks, including intimidation and arrest of journalists. It was telling that though one of the early arrests of the government was the veteran editor of a popular Bengali daily, who remains jailed, local newspapers have been virtually silent about the persecution of one of their senior colleagues.

One analyst blames the emergence of large corporate interests for the conciliatory role to authoritarianism played by the media [1]. Easily intimidated, the media was quick to use the government's terms and discourses virtually unquestioned, publishing, for example, the government's side of court cases but not arguments by the defense, or passing guilty verdicts to political 'bigwigs' even before cases were resolved. Especially in the first few months since 1/11, op-eds and commentaries were rarely critical of the government, and when they were, the criticisms were usually leveled in a veiled language. Episode 3. Human rights begin to bite

During this time, international papers like The Economist, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Foreign Policy, and The Guardian began to warn their readers particularly about the violations of human rights taking place in Bangladesh. Much of the local media remained lukewarm about these violations. Muhammad Zafar Iqbal recounted in a powerful essay (translated elsewhere in this e-zine) how difficult it was for him, even though he is a famous writer, to publicize the brutal torture and killing of indigenous activist Choles Ritchil in the hands of 'joint forces.' For others not as famous but equally concerned, most outlets were unavailable.

But on the street, the government's political motives under the guise of cleanup became clearer and clearer. The

fiasco of trying to force ‘the two begums’ into exile was the turning point. The media, which earlier was itself complicit in trying to force political reforms, began to make occasional criticisms of the government’s heavy-handed political meddling. But the game of carrots and sticks would continue, and occasional courageous unity in the local media would soon be followed by subservience. Tasneem Khalil, a loose-cannon-type journalist, was picked up by the army, intimidated, and tortured, but little of that was carried in the local media, even though international sources, such as BBC and CNN, carried the news prominently. Episode 4. The foreigners begin to split

Foreign players, over the months, became divided in their support for the government. The same two factors—political purging and human rights violations—that were beginning to unite, although only sporadically, parts of the local media were also breaking up foreign supporters. Foreign diplomats were caught by surprise at the extent of authoritarian rule that appeared eventually. They did not expect the wholesale purging of the political class. Some of them were annoyed by the double standards of the government in claiming to be neutral but driven clearly by a political agenda.

The divide has been most visible between popular representatives, such as senators and MPs on the one hand, and the executive branches, such as the US State Department or the British Foreign Office on the other. As early as May, fifteen prominent US senators wrote a strongly-worded letter to the Chief Advisor to withdraw the state of emergency, respect human rights, and follow due process. Groups of US congressmen have continued to write to the CTG on similar issues. When the CTG forced Sheikh Hasina to be stranded in the UK, and then more recently when she was arrested, groups of British MPs have spoken out quite strongly. The UN, the EU, the US Congress, and the Australian Parliament have all discussed and raised concern about the Bangladeshi government’s human rights violations.

A similar outcry has come from human rights groups, such as Amnesty International, and as recently as August 1, from the Human Rights Watch. HRW’s recent letter was particularly strong, noting that human rights abuses, including torture and deaths in custody, had become ‘serious and systematic’ under the current interim government.

The executive branches of the US and the UK, more or less, have continued to support the CTG, perhaps aided by active effort by the CTG to dispatch emissaries to appease these countries. The US State Department’s weekly reactions have hardly changed over the last six months: supporting the government’s anti-corruption drive with a routine insertion about the desire to see democracy return. One exception was Patricia Butenis, the US Ambassador, and easily the most influential foreign diplomat in Bangladesh. Once in strong support of the government, she began to be increasingly critical toward the end of her tenure, with frustration visible in public. Fortunately for the CTG, she was posted to Iraq—and it is certain that her replacement will take a pretty long time before understanding the complexities going on beneath the surface. Episode 5?

And so, here we are: the government’s political persecution and human rights violations are finally returning like an giant boomerang. The local media is still generally docile but slightly more emboldened, perhaps slightly more unified. On the other hand, foreign support is still there, but with increasing divides and large question marks. The pivot now is the government’s economic mismanagement, driven by its quick adoption of misguided prescriptions from the IMF to withdraw price supports and close factories at a time when supply is trickling to a halt, inflation is nearing a historic high, and floods are ravaging the country. Foreign support was crucial to making this government, but local discontent, aided by an economic fallout, may become the driver in breaking it, unless Bangladesh’s rulers begin to seriously mend their ways.

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