

# Problems and potentials: an eyewitness in Bangladesh

by Paul Zykofsky from Dacca

Ever since Henry Kissinger referred to Bangladesh as a “basket case,” in the early 1970s, this South Asian nation has been commonly cited as an example of a country that will have to reduce its population if it wishes to survive. This is invariably the argument put forth by the neo-Malthusians responsible for the Global 2000 documents. Last year the London *Daily Telegraph* went so far as to argue that Bangladesh should be “peopled by less than one-tenth of its present population.” That such population-reduction levels can only be achieved through famine, war and pestilence—i.e., genocide—is left unsaid.

Yet despite Bangladesh’s population of 92 million and one of the highest population densities in the world, the Malthusian argument that its population growth must outstrip food production is exposed as a blatant fraud. At present Bangladesh can produce 15 million tons of food grains per year—just short of the amount needed to feed its population. But Bangladesh has enormous agricultural potential. Situated at the mouth of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, four-fifths of the land in Bangladesh is arable and can be cultivated year-round. With the proper irrigation projects and fertilizer inputs, Bangladesh could produce an estimated 60 million tons of food grain, becoming a major world food producer and exporter.

At present, however, as this correspondent found during a recent nine-day visit to Dacca, the deterioration in the Western economies, on which Bangladesh is still largely dependent for aid, combined with a bad harvest this year, are threatening the country with famine and conditions of severe austerity (see page 46).

Though Vice-President Abdus Sattar was elected to the presidency by a large majority in November elections, he has failed to stabilize the situation, and there are growing rumors that the already powerful armed forces will take power and plunge Bangladesh into another

round of the coups and countercoups which have proliferated since it achieved independence in 1971 (see box).

As in 1971, when Bangladesh’s struggle for independence from Pakistan led to a massive influx of refugees into neighboring India, confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, and to war between India and Pakistan, a crisis in Bangladesh today could well lead to a broader strategic conflict. U.S. plans to provide arms to the Ziaul Haq dictatorship in Pakistan have already led to increased tensions with India. In this context observers in India are only too well aware of the strategy voiced by Henry Kissinger in 1971: using an influx of refugees from upheaval in Bangladesh to “bleed India.” Already the ascendance in Bangladesh of Islamic fundamentalist strata with known pro-Pakistani sentiments, combined with moves towards a military government, not only is leading to greater strife within Bangladesh but will aggravate relations with India.

## Roots of the crisis

During the 1980s Bangladesh’s relations with neighboring India were, though strained, not bitter. After present Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi assumed office in January, 1980, Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman visited India. Although Bangladesh and India continued to disagree on most issues, the internal situation within Bangladesh remained stable under President Ziaur Rahman.

This crisis can be traced back to the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman last May, presumably by disgruntled elements of the army led by Major-General Manzoor. The subsequent assassination of Manzoor and other officers of the Chittagong garrison under his command has obscured what was involved in the attempted coup. However, since then the Army Chief of Staff, General H. M. Ershad has emerged as one of the

most powerful figures in Bangladesh. Ershad is credited with having convinced the ailing 76-year-old Sattar to take the reins of power and to run as the candidate for President of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the party established by Ziaur Rahman. After the elections Ershad staked his claim to power by demanding the establishment of a "National Security Council" with the three military chiefs, the President, Vice-President, and Prime Minister which would function as a civilian-military "super-cabinet."

Sattar, apparently still in the flush of his electoral victory, rejected this demand and instead constituted a National Security Council with three military and six civilian members. His rejection of General Ershad's demands created a rift between the civilian government and the military and led to widespread rumors of a military coup in early February.

President Sattar's problems have been compounded by his inability to keep the BNP united. Founded by General Ziaur Rahman in 1978 to build up his political base and "civilianize" his regime, the BNP is a heterogeneous party with factions recruited from other parties. While Zia's strong rule was able to keep a balance among the various groups in the BNP, Sattar has relied primarily on a right-wing faction led by Prime Minister Shah Azizur Rahman for his base of support. Shah Azizur was part of the small group of Bangladeshi politicians who opposed the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, and he and his allies are identified with the Islamic fundamentalists in the Jamaate Islami.

As a result, about 70 of the BNP's total of 206 Members of Parliament have openly broken with Sattar. One dissident leader I met bitterly criticized Sattar for having undermined the BNP's own base of popular support by relying on the Shah Azizur group. "Though I think we should accommodate some of the small minority of misguided elements who opposed Bangladesh's liberation, Sattar is discrediting the BNP," he noted. "The people don't like collaborationists [those who collaborated with Pakistan against Bangladesh's independence—P.Z.] to be running the government."

Others discounted the role of the BNP dissidents. "They are a bunch of opportunists who are upset over Sattar's refusal to include them in his cabinet," an Asian diplomat in Dacca told me. At the same time there are reports that the dissidents are being egged on by the armed forces, who are using them as leverage to force Sattar to yield to their demands for a greater share of power. This view was strengthened when General Ershad, in a series of statements after the election, attacked the government for including "anti-liberation" elements, i.e., the Shah Azizur faction of the BNP.

However, in early February Sattar yielded to some of these pressures by quietly restructuring the National Security Council, as demanded by the armed forces, and

## A political profile of Bangladesh

For almost two centuries the area encompassed by what is now Bangladesh was looted extensively by the British East India Company—the employer of Thomas Malthus—and its successor, the British Empire. Simultaneously the land-tenure structure and all native industries were destroyed. To prevent the well-developed weaving industry—which produced the world-famous Dacca muslin—from competing with English textiles, the British resorted to a simple measure: they broke the hands of the Dacca weavers.

At the time of independence from Britain in 1947, the area that is now Bangladesh was partitioned off from India on the basis of its majority Muslim population, and became East Pakistan, the poorest of Pakistan's provinces and over 1,000 miles from the seat of government in West Pakistan.

Economic exploitation by West Pakistan and efforts to impose Urdu as the major language on the Bengali-speaking population led to a movement for the autonomy of East Pakistan. When in 1971 the military rulers in West Pakistan responded with a campaign of systematic slaughter, East Pakistan launched a liberation struggle which a few months later culminated in the establishment of an independent, secular Bangladesh with the support of India and the Soviet Union. Under Henry Kissinger's direction the United States sided with the Pakistani military rulers and their allies in Peking.

Since 1971 Bangladesh has led a troubled existence with numerous coups and counter-coups, especially after 1975 when independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family were brutally assassinated in a coup led by a small group of army officers. In the aftermath of the assassination of Mujib, General Ziaur Rahman, then Army Chief of Staff, assumed control and was able to maintain political stability in the years that followed by ruthlessly putting down subsequent military uprisings, eliminating potential opponents, and suppressing political activity.

A gradual process of "democratization" was introduced in 1979 but the relative stability achieved under Ziaur Rahman was shattered last May when he was assassinated.

by reshuffling his cabinet. While the Shah Azizur group retained its control in the new cabinet, there are reports that Sattar promised the dissidents that they would receive concessions later on. In meeting the demands of the military it is generally believed that President Sattar has bought some time; however, he has also exposed his government's weakness, and it remains to be seen how long the armed forces will be willing to stay behind the scenes.

### The Awami League

Any moves by the armed forces will have to take into consideration the growing popular strength of the Awami League, the party founded by independence leader and first Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. After languishing under repression following the military coup against Mujib in 1975, the Awami emerged as the sole major opposition party in the November 1981 elections, and some of its leaders claim that, had it not been for vote fraud, it might have won. In a discussion with this correspondent the Awami's presidential candidate in the November elections, Kamal Hossain, noted that despite all of the Awami League's handicaps during the elections and the fact that they were pitted against state power, "we have been overwhelmed by the response of the population."

However, the Awami League has also suffered from factionalization between the right- and left-wing sections of the party. In an effort to keep the party together, Sheikh Mujib's daughter, Hasina Wajed, was prevailed upon to return from self-imposed exile in India to assume the Presidentship of the Awami a few months before the assassination of Ziaur Rahman. However, Mrs. Wajed has apparently been unable to stay above the various factions, and there are new reports of strife within the party.

Several members of the Awami League also expressed to me their concern over the growing strength of Islamic fundamentalism, inside the military as well as outside. The fundamentalists are primarily grouped in the Jamaate Islami, the equivalent on the Indian subcontinent of the Muslim Brotherhood which brought Khomeini to power in Iran. Although Bangladesh was established as a secular nation, the Jamaate is reported to have the support of approximately 20 percent of the population. In an effort to obtain financial assistance from Arab countries, Ziaur Rahman promoted greater "Islamization" of the country—a move which allowed the Jamaate to increase its strength. At present the Jamaate is training its young cadre, recruited from colleges with lavish gifts, along paramilitary lines. The Jamaate has reportedly built up its strength with extensive financial support from Saudi Arabian sources and is considered one of the best organized, most homogeneous forces in the country.

---

## Interview

---



## Farm Minister: 'We can quadruple agricultural output'

*In the following interview Agriculture Minister Dr. Fasihuddin Mahtab discusses the short- and long-term outlook for food production in Bangladesh as well as some of the overall difficulties the economy is facing. The 46-year-old Dr. Mahtab, who holds a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, was the founder-director of a private engineering and consulting firm before he joined the government. In 1977 he was appointed Deputy Adviser to President Ziaur Rahman in charge of Agriculture and in April 1979 became Minister for Planning. He returned to the Agriculture Ministry in November 1981.*

*In late February, soon after this interview was conducted by EIR correspondent Paul Zykofsky in Dacca, Dr. Mahtab was shifted to head up the Finance Ministry.*

*At the time this interview took place, appeals for emergency grains had gone out to traditional aid donors; even the World Bank urged speeded-up shipments of at least a half million tons of grains. As of early February, government officials expected the donors to come through, although they had few firm commitments.*

**Zykofsky:** What is the outlook for food production this year?