

BOOK REVIEW

**Emajuddin Ahamed, *Military Rule and the Myth of Democracy*,
University Press Ltd, Dhaka, 1988, v+148 pages, Price: Tk. 175.00**

Studies on military intervention in politics have been one of the growth areas within political science in recent years. Political scientists and analysts have adopted various methodologies and theoretical approaches in trying to explain the factors underlying the involvement of military in politics, its various implications for the state and society, particularly for the prospect of democracy in the Third World context. Although such studies have for obvious reasons focused almost exclusively on the Third World states, great majority of them have been carried on by Western scholars and theoreticians. In more recent periods, however, the subject has gained notable attention of scholarly enquiry by Third World political scientists. Studies of both macro and micro nature and both theoretical and case-oriented type by such scholars continue to add to the literature on the subject. Of particular interest are the studies emerging from countries that have been experiencing the agonies of military rule. The book under review titled, *Military Rule and the Myth of Democracy*, by Prof Emajuddin Ahamed (EA), a leading political scientist of Bangladesh, is among the latest of the type.

Emerging independent with nascent and inadequate institutionalisation of the overall socio-politico-economic structures, Bangladesh soon got beset with welter of problems, uncertainties and controversies of fundamental nature. The period since 1971 has been traumatic with recurrent political and economic crises and instability.

Ceaseless dissensions and doubts over the role of the main interest groups, continued disrespect to democratic institutions, and above all, unresolved issues of legitimacy have led to chronic political unrest and tension. And in this whole process role of armed forces has emerged as so critical an issue that Bangladesh can by now be rightly viewed as a test-case of democratic experimentation and military intervention.

To be fair, Bangladesh started off with a Westminster type democratic government where the parliament comprising directly elected representatives of the people was to have the supremacy in statecraft. The cabinet was directly responsible to the parliament for all its actions and policies. The system worked well for the first few years. But the democratic experimentation turned out to be short-lived, and soon it was clear that being an intermediate-praetorian society, the prospect of democracy here is seized within a triangular trap of military intervention followed by a facade of civilianization, and subsequent retreat towards militarization in the face of popular upheavals. Democracy and its principles soon turned out to be mythical and ironically though have been used most often as instrument of machination by the dominant interest groups particularly military-civil bureaucracy with or without a coalition of convenience with disgrantled political elements. Political actions and institutions are used more often than not as instruments to legitimise authority which has been exercised not as a trust but as source of endless privileges and opportunities misused and handled without accountability. In this whole process the masses have been alienated, political institutions have been weakened, and the statecraft has been critically vulnerable to power-game on illicit rules and to the use of power for power. Most importantly, there has been corruptive and pervasive misuse of whatever semblance of democratic institutions were around, and there is hardly any indications to the prospect of breaking the trap.

In this backdrop EA's book is certain to be a reading of keen interest. The author concentrates on the analysis of some of the coups and coup-attempts in Bangladesh during 1975-82 "not as conspiratorial episodes, but mainly in terms of social dynamics and political forces" (p.v.). The main conclusion of the book is that since political institutions are weak and unstable and political elites depend quite often on military for day-to-day administration, they are not likely to stay long in power by injuring the 'corporate interest' of the military. EA projects a dilemma—on the one hand civilian governments are likely to be continually embroiled in societal unrest because of rising societal expectations amidst critical scarcity of resources, On the other hand, rule by military-bureaucratic elite may temporarily contain problems but are ultimately more likely to end up in popular uprising and socio-political instability.

The way out in the opinion of EA is the recognition of supreme interest of the society by both the military and civil politicians by which he indicates a two-way understanding—as if a *quid pro quo*—politicians to recognise the importance of military as an essential arm of the government in exchange for military recognising that only political institutions are capable of fashioning a broad-based consensus in the society. The question, however, is, how such an understanding is to be reached? In what way it would work? More importantly, in the backdrop of continued motivation for intervention who or what is going to ensure functioning of such understanding? EA leaves answer to such questions to those who would probably undertake further studies on the subject.

In his first chapter called "Political Role of the Military in the Third World" EA sets the analytical perspective for his book. One finds some very useful data on the incidence of military rule in Third World countries. More interesting is however the rest of the chapter where he provides an analysis of the reasons for military intervention. Three inter-related factors are identified : first, capability and organisational superiority of the military which is of course a

function of the very nature of the armed forces. EA stresses the relative organisational strength and discipline of the army as an institution, which is drawn from its chain of command, allocation of functions, specification of rank and unity of purpose. The second is related to the armed forces' corporate interest, any threat to which generates interventionist motives. EA's third factor refers to the weakness of the political system including the fragility of institutions and chronic instability, lack of consensus, leadership and legitimacy crisis which provide the occasion to intervene. One important lacuna of this framework appears to be the issues of external linkage and inputs, particularly aid and training and role of multinational corporations. Yet another under-emphasized issue seems to be the question of deprofessionalisation, which EA does not fail to mention. The factors like technical inability to administer any but most primitive country, lack of moral right to rule are also examined. It may be noted further that the issue of deprofessionalisation is a sort of egg-n-chicken controversy with politicization. Education, training, life-style, value system—all these are profession-oriented. But problem arises when as a result of politicization and repeated intervention, the process of deprofessionalisation sets in which leads to further politicization, and crave for political power.

Politicization of the armed forces in Bangladesh is the subject of EA's second chapter. The author presents a brief historical evolution of the politicization process and argues that politicization is rooted in the hardships and oppression under alien rule over the years of history which made the Bengalis the "most political people in the sub-continent." This had its reflection in the behaviour of the Bengali youths whether in civil or military services. The author concludes here that "the Bangladesh army, which was the lineal descendent of the British, Indian and Pakistan army, inherited not only the institutional framework of their predecessors but also their ethos, especially their orientation against the politics of civilians and at the same time their consciousness of political power" (p 45).

Problem arises when one seeks to comprehend the distinction between politicization out of the Liberation War and that out of the factors that EA has identified in his analytical frame. EA says that the Liberation War of 1971 put the *finishing touch* (emphasis added) on the politicization of armed forces in Bangladesh (p. 45). It remains to be seen if this is justified by facts. If by politicization is meant here a growing intention to intervene in the civilian administration and an urge to perpetuate the role of military in politics and administration, then it may be more out of post-1971 developments than the Liberation War itself that contributed to such politicization. A distinction could perhaps be made between politicization for nationalist cause to oppose and fight enemy forces on the one hand, and politicization for intervention in national civil administration on the other.

Chapter 3 depicts the emergence of military as the ruling elite in Bangladesh. The main factors identified here are corporate interest of the military and its basically anti-political attitude. EA critically evaluates the exercise of overwhelming power by the political elite during 1972-75 with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the apex. The authoritarianism exercised during the period alienated the regime from "almost all the sections of the politically relevant people" (p. 64). The author also makes an attempt to expose the systemic weakness and performance failures of the Awami League regime. The internal schisms and factionalism within both the civilian and military elites are also briefly brought out to show the process of enforced alienation of the regime—a process through which the military elite not only emerged with the upper hand, but also proclaimed itself as the only force capable of "saving the nation".

In Chapters 4 and 5, EA revisits the backgrounds, motivations and actual course of the coups and coup-attempts that were staged by armed forces in Bangladesh. Particularly fascinating are the sections on the 3 November 1975 coup which he calls a 'veto-coup' (p. 79) and the 7 November 1975 soldier's uprising which he views

as one that at least for a time battered and twisted the existing archaic structure of the armed forces (p.101). The chapters are quite interesting for their revealing presentation of the profile of the main architects and forces behind the series of coups during the period.

Contrary to what EA suggests, it appears from his analysis that corporate interest as a factor in coup-making had only a secondary role to play. It was internal feuding, high ambitions of individual officers, and above all personal and/or group rivalry towards each other that contributed most significantly to the serial occurrence of coups in Bangladesh. If corporate interest contributed to coups/coup-attempts, it did only peripherally—the way corporate interest was perceived by the architects of the coup. There seems to be indeed a substantial amount of subjectivity within the ranks of the armed forces in relation to what really is to be understood by corporate interest.

Turning to the subsequent coups/coup attempts (chapter 6), EA critically examines the various theories and interpretations and concludes that Zia became the victim of circumstances, and the corporate interests of the military elite remained entwined with the circumstances over which the cavalier nature of General Zia most often had very little control. The armed forces personnel who enjoyed his limitless love and confidence, thus became his assassins on 30 May 1981; but the irony of fate remains that it was his death which did more than anything else to knit the armed forces in Bangladesh" (p. 128).

The fact that Zia became a victim of circumstances (the way he was also a creation of circumstances) can hardly be disputed. So is the assertion that at the later stages of his regime he gradually lost the control over circumstances that motivated actions by a section of the military elite. But it remains to be explained how, as the author proclaims, the corporate interest of the military once again worked as the motive force behind the coup. If anything, it was the professional rivalry, jealousy and antagonism of certain individual officers

that prompted coup-makers. It also remains to be seen whether and to what extent Zia's death helped to "knit the armed forces in Bangladesh". Moreover, perhaps because of lack of information EA dropped the analysis of some of the coup-attempts staged during the Zia regime, some of which were even mentioned in the Jatiya Sangsad by the then Prime Minister.

In a brief 6-page chapter on the 24 March 1982 coup the author analyses the factors that brought the Ershad regime into power. Here again the emphasis is on the 'corporate interest' although the author mentions the feuding within the BNP, the ruling political party. To justify his corporate interest theory, the author banks upon the off-quoted assertion of General Ershad whereby the latter wanted a constitutional role for the army in the country's politics. The controversial District Council Bill is also shown as a demonstration of strong adherence to corporate interest. So far so good. But one would have anticipated from a keen observer of Bangladesh politics an expose of certain deeper aspects of the problem, namely, what really prompted the demand for such a constitutional role at that particular point of time? To what extent it was to have a permanent nature? It would be interesting to observe the relative importance of the demand for constitutional role for the army in the overall politicking of the regime in the subsequent period. After all, does a demand like this serve the corporate interest of the armed forces in real sense particularly in the long term? These are some of the issues perhaps to be taken up by further studies on the subject. It seems also that the corporate interest theory has been over-emphasized, as it is evident that this cannot adequately explain all coups or coup attempts.

In his seventh and concluding chapter Ahamed summarizes the main theses of the earlier chapters. Having read the book, one feels that something that the title of the book promises to offer is missing. There is very little about "Military Rule" as such, and even less, if not nothing, about "Myth of Democracy". The attractive title of

book would have prompted one to expect that there would be some analytical review of the experience of military rule in Bangladesh and its impact on the future prospect of democracy in the country. The author chose to concentrate on some other not-too-unimportant issues, factors and figures in coup-making in Bangladesh. To that extent of course the book offers interesting insight and if would be a worthy reading for anyone interested not only in the stories of coups and/or coup-attempts in the country but also some of the more important factors in contemporary Bangladesh politics.

A word finally on the publishers of the book, the University Press Ltd, which is doing a commendable job in academic publishing. The get-up and printing, but for some irritating printers devil, are excellent. At Taka 175.00 however, it seems too costly, although the price is rather modest compared to what readers pay for books published by UPL's foreign counterparts.

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