

BOOK REVIEW

Understanding Bangladesh by S. Mahmud Ali, London, Hurst, 2010, xvii + 441 pp., ISBN 978-1-85065-998-3

Bangladesh has an exceptional history and a set of circumstances that have spurred its bloody birth into the world. Despite the odds, the country has maintained an impressive track record on growth and development since its inception. Its efforts in women's empowerment, poverty reduction, and disaster management have remained unparalleled in the field of development. Nonetheless, the country has been moulded by its particularly difficult past, and how it has risen from the ashes of war and genocide is of vital importance to both political scientists and war studies academics alike. Thus, *Understanding Bangladesh* is a brilliantly articulate foray into the political philosophies, military structures, and the eventual martial and governmental dissidence that have shaped the South Asian nation since its inception. In this publication, illustrious author and scholar, S. Mahmud Ali eloquently delves into the shifts in political and economic paradigms that have moulded the country's unique socio-economic climate throughout its formative years.

The book spans a total of 441 pages, including a preface followed by seven chapters, as well as general sections dedicated to other prefatory segments, notes with citations, a glossary, an appendix, a list of abbreviations, and an index. Each chapter begins with an abstract that provides a brief background-cum-summary of what it aims to cover. The research is augmented by Ali's training in the Pakistan Academy, his experience as a researcher at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies and at King's College, University of London, and his twenty years spent as a journalist for the BBC World Service, which have all provided the depth of knowledge necessary to create a factual and unbiased account of the events that sparked the Liberation War, and the ensuing political tumult that resulted in the years thereafter. Added to his literary repertoire, Ali is also an author of several volumes on Asia-Pacific security issues, demonstrating the necessary understanding of the issues that have plagued this young nation since its formation.

Nestled behind the eye-catching orange hardcover which depicts a Bangladeshi 10 *paisa* stamp, the book opens with a clear-cut table of contents, including a list of tables and a preface. Each chapter is designated a title with either allegorical allusions, or is alliterated for the reader's benefit and easy recall. The "Preface" begins with a concise background into the key individuals and events that have shaped Bangladesh's national, regional, and global politics. It further dissects the country's roots from as a part of India, then Pakistan, and finally into an independent state by dissecting its journey into several chapters. Following its nine-month long civil war which ended with a *coup de grace* delivered by Indian forces in the last month of the conflict (p. ix), Ali goes on to explain how Bangladesh was born

utterly debilitated. He further explains how the country's external interactions with key global players have also shaped the final outcome of the war, with the US-China-USSR strategic triangle serving as its backdrop. Also explained is that the foundation of the book is based on the rational-empirical model, and that the ultimate objective of the book is to "examine Bangladesh as an unusual case of state-formation, offering a detached but empathetic account of some of the watersheds marking its political experience" (p. xii). In order to achieve this, each of the consequent chapters is shortly summarised, and the chapter ends with a glint of hope, due in part to the country's growing macro-economic performance despite the nation's "abysmally poor record of governance" (p. xvi).

"Chapter One: The Past as Prologue" begins with the political developments that followed the legacy of colonial era politics. It marks the various actors that have influenced the country from 1757 to 1971, including the transitioning of "northern Hindu kingdoms" to give way to Afghan, Turkic, and Central Asian Muslim successors (p. 1). Also prevalent is the influence left behind by the various *Ashrafs* and *Zaminders*, and the British colonisation of India at the time. Thus, even in its earliest days, the Bengal region saw the exchanges of power between numerous foreign players. Under various sub-headings, the chapter goes on to explain the role of Pakistan and its oppressive military in paving the division between West and East Pakistan. Helpful tables supplement the explanation of inter-wing disparity between West Pakistan and East Pakistan, which played as a major factor culminating into the events of Liberation War of 1971. The chapter then brings to the fore an explanation of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's *Six Point Charter* in breaking the bonds from West Pakistan and building the metaphorical road to Bangladesh, and ends on a harrowing note with "Operation Searchlight" underway, where "the Pakistan established in 1947 was coming to an end and Bangladesh's bloody genesis had begun" (p. 54).

Thus, begins "Chapter Two: War, Independence and Blood Feuds", which lists the major developments from the failure of the leaders of Pakistan's two wings in reaching a compromise after the parliamentary polls held in the 1970's, to the tragic death of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family due to a coup, ending Mujib's Second Revolution and heralding the foundations for the sanguinary third. The main contributions of this chapter are an analysis into the darkness of 'Operation Searchlight', the formation of Bangladesh, Mujib's presidency, the creation of Awami League, the flight of thousands of Bengali refugees into India amidst climatic catastrophes and famine-like conditions, and the roles played by India, the US, China, and USSR in choosing sides during the war. All of these occurred behind the backdrop of "flood damage, low stocks, hoarding perhaps compounded by some smuggling, weak administrative and distributive mechanisms, and party-political corruption" which brought millions of Bangladeshis to the brink of starvation (p. 108).

Hence, "Chapter Three: In the Valkyrie's Shadow" signals the main events of 1975 to 1990, through which the "period of violent uncertainty overtook Bangladesh after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination" (p. 115) and led to General Ziaur Rahman's ascension into command of martial law administration and then presidency. It highlights the emergence of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which used "religious iconography" to create a "Bangladeshi nationalist framework" as opposed to the "Bengali symbolism used by the Awami League" (p. 116). It goes on to explain the '*Sepoy Mutiny*', the expansion and clashes of the tribal insurgents '*Shanti Bahini guerilla*' with the government, and the controversial '*Islamising of the Constitution*' with abandonment of the 1971 campaign's aspects. Further, it explains both the contributions of Zia's regime to military and other expenditures, and finally the possible reasons behind the mutiny which killed Zia. Finally, it explains the events which led to General Ershad's presidency and administration, and its failings which led to his stepping down from the ironic legacy where "the army now made the emergence of a new democratic era possible" (p. 187). The chapter leaves with a trace of a rising conundrum that comes to mind, which is the distinction in the definitions of civil war and liberation war.

"Chapter Four: The Plight of Parliamentary Politics" then covers the events between 1990 and 2007, since the resignation of General Ershad. This chapter covers the yo-yoing power play between the two political parties, Awami League and BNP, listing both their socio-economic contributions and burdens upon the struggling nation. To this end, many helpful tables and statistics are provided to lay out a factual foundation of both administrations. The increasing scale of corruption in many government utilities providers that moved in tandem with the political and administrative corruption is also highlighted, in fact, Bangladesh had become the "most corrupt country in the world" (p. 242). It was similarly established that "violent political polarisation was now the established reality of democratic Bangladesh" (p. 227). Notwithstanding, the nation still made progress towards its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with the help from various international aid agencies and stakeholders, until the culmination of events led to a state of emergency being declared.

"Chapter Five: A Reformist Interregnum" continues from the growing concerns over the consequences of a "zero-sum conflict between Khaleda Zia's BNP-led administration and the Awami League-led opposition headed by Sheikh Hasina" (p. 251). This chapter describes how the elections were constantly delayed, until the Awami League's landslide victory finally became evident. The role of the military here is again constantly touched upon, and the dismal reality of politics slowing down economic progress is presented. An extremely relevant contribution of this chapter is laid out in the gradual rise of radical extremes of the political spectrum, which is particularly important in current affairs due to the growing threat of radicalisation in Bangladesh.

Thus, “Chapter Six: A Land of Anger” – Right, Left, Centre, and the Other returns with this narrative of various other factions that were also influential to the country’s politics. It highlights different clashing perspectives, and provides the roots of extremism, providing too a historical context, as well as the looming threat of the extreme left. It also focuses on the significance of student politics and activism in shaping the nation’s policies. It ends with brief accounts of the country’s situation regarding water, insurgency, trade, investment, and security issues, among others, finally climaxing with an analysis of the major problems that Bangladesh faces with India – the country that once helped it reach its independence – if Bangladesh were to become a “strategically and geo-politically” important hub and a significant global economic power.

Finally, “Epilogue: A Blood-soaked Restoration” provides an account of the despotic Peelkhana massacre, and includes possible reasons for its occurrence, as well as various considerable conspiracy theories. The book concludes with further explanations of the major challenges, aside from those falling under the political or economic continuum, that still plague the nation today. The effects of climate change, arsenic poisoning due to contaminated wells, and the exploding population – with the current figures estimating 156.6 million - are some issues that are brought to the fore.

As the focus on understanding the unique circumstances that have given birth to this turbulent nation is made apparent, politicians, as well as academic researchers in international relations, peace and conflict studies, analysts in defence studies, and other related disciplines of social sciences can benefit from learning the way this unique nation’s politics have shaped its economic circumstances, and *vice versa*. Likewise, any keen observer in South Asian policy and development can gain to learn from this book. Its importance is further augmented from Bangladesh’s proximity to India, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan, and China, as well as its participation and membership in various bilateral and multilateral trade agreements and regional organisations, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Trade and Investment Cooperation Framework Agreement (TICFA), and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), deeming it of strategic importance in the international arena. Most appreciable, however, is the fact that the country was shaped by the only ever Language Movement which had led to the Liberation War of 1971, which brought about its independence and deemed it worthy of scrutiny by involved international parties and political scientists worldwide. Despite the odds, the country has made great strides towards development, which have not forgone Ali’s narrative.

The book is not without its criticisms, however. Considering editorial mistakes, there are a few spelling and grammatical errors that should be revised. The

main criticism, however, lies in the almost exclusively political stance – with some emphasis on economic viewpoints – which flavours the writing. As the title implies, for an even more holistic approach, legal and sociological perspectives may also be considered. Similarly, although the book focuses on mainly contemporary issues that impact the nation, a brief account of the anthropological roots which brought Bengali culture into prominence could be considered, as this has and still does play a pivotal role in shaping the country's identity politics. Further, the perspectives could be better shaped if some historical background on the tendency of political violence to uproot the nation is provided since previous centuries – digging into ancient times and the anthropological background into the various races that make up the melting pot of a nation today would also be a good contribution for a more complete approach. This could help provide insight into the background of the "Us vs. Them" mentality in the country's various political factions. Further, the book is based on the rational-empirical model. However, if the reader is to fully understand the benefits of using this approach, its assumptions and weaknesses should be briefly explained.

Finally, the epilogue chapter could also consider providing some accounts of Bangladesh's micro-credit successes, its migratory shifts – including both brain drain and the contributions by the Bangladeshi diaspora and climate displacement, its major strides in disaster management, and other relevant themes to further expand upon the scope of the book.

In conclusion, *"Understanding Bangladesh"* is a remarkable book that should be lauded for its holistic, chronological, variegated, and unbiased account of the events that had transpired both before and since Bangladesh's independence, hence providing a scholarly and objective perspective into the political upbringing of Bangladesh, as opposed to a purely emotional one. Further, the literary elegance provides a delightfully nuanced read. It provides detailed analysis on the key events of the events that transpired, as well as their consequences. Further, the wealth of empirical evidence and the necessary citations adds to the utility of this book. There is much for this small, riparian nation to learn if it is to emerge more triumphantly, and if the nation is to grow from its mistakes, books such as *"Understanding Bangladesh"* would be a good starting point to consider.

Reviewed by

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