

BANGLADESH – a brief history

(News Internationalist 332, March 2001. © News Internationalist 2001)



Above: A Sanskrit message in Bangla script.

A LAND APART
Bangladesh may only have existed as an independent state for 30 years but its cultural and linguistic roots go deep. The Bangla language (the term Bengali was just a British colonial rendering of this) was distinct by the 7th century and a literature written in it was emerging by the 7th century. Religion has also tended to set the Bangla-speaking people apart: for more than a millennium they bucked the Hindu trend by remaining Buddhist, while since the 12th century, when Muslims invaded from the northwest, Islam has won the loyalty of the majority.

CONQUEST BY CLIVE OF INDIA

Though threatened by Indian expansion and Portuguese raiders, the land remained largely autonomous until June 1757 when the British sent soldiers under Robert Clive to defeat a force led by local ruler Nawab Siraj-ud-Dwola at the Battle of Plassey

Below: Officers of the British Raj arriving by carriage at Fulbaria Station in Dhaka as local soldiers keep back the crowds.



Top right: Women volunteers preparing to fight the West Pakistani army in 1969.

Bottom: Sheikh Mujib arriving home in triumph after the liberation war on 10 January 1972. Some of those around him have been implicated in his murder three years later.

Middle right: Bangladesh's two female prime ministers, Khaleda Zia (left) and the current incumbent Sheikh Hasina, pictured together after the fall of the dictator General Ershad in 1990.



that they had to reunite the province in 1912. By 1946 it was clear to the British that they were going to have to quit India - and that a united India was going to be impossible to preserve. Bengal's Muslim League Chief Minister, Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy, agreed with local Hindu leader Sarat Chandra Bose to claim an independent united Bengal. Instead when partition came in 1947 it was on the basis of religion, not language. The eastern part of Bengal thus became East Pakistan while the west remained part of India - though the Chittagong Hill Tracts (only three-per-cent Muslim) went to East Pakistan.

WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

The links between the two wings of Pakistan were tenuous, however, and the East was threatened from the first by Pakistan leader Mohammed Ali Jinnah's avid promotion of Urdu as the national language. Bangla discontent festered, particularly after the military took over in Pakistan in 1958. Resistance coalesced



around Mujibur Rahman (known as Sheikh Mujib), who was jailed repeatedly by the military while campaigning for autonomy. In 1971 Mujib's Awami League won 167 of 169 seats in East Pakistan. Amid crisis talks aimed at preventing independence, West Pakistan's army launched a genocidal attack, killing thousands and arresting Mujib. Around 10 million refugees fled to India, where Awami League leaders declared independence on 26 March. Dogged guerrilla

covert US backing. A series of further military coups ensued, which eventually saw General Hossain Mohammad Ershad emerge on top. He was to remain there through the 1980s, courtesy of phoney elections.

DEMOCRACY AS GANG WARFARE

Opposition to the Ershad regime grew steadily in the late 1980s and he eventually resigned after weeks of violent demonstrations in December 1990. An



resistance began until finally, in December 1971, the Indian army invaded and ejected Pakistani forces. The war had cost three million lives. Mujib became leader of an independent Bangladesh.

DESCENT INTO DICTATORSHIP

By 1974, though, the Mujib Government was in trouble. A devastating famine killed 50,000, prompting a huge influx of foreign aid to a country perceived by the West as a 'basket-case'. With the country spinning out of control, Mujib assumed dictatorial powers and banned all opposition. He was assassinated within months by right-wing army officers, allegedly with

election was contested between two parties headed by women: the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's Khaleda Zia, widow of assassinated military leader Zia ur Rahman, and the Awami League's Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Mujib (the current prime minister). The 1990s have seen these two parties trade places - while retaining the widespread corruption institutionalized during the Ershad regime. The nation's politics are largely characterized by gang warfare between the two major parties: independent political activity is technically allowed but remains in practice a desperately dangerous business.