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Bangladesh: Against the Memory of Liberation

By Ashish Singh
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Anisur Rahman, *a Bangladeshi-Swedish writer, argues that the political process in Bangladesh today is no longer primarily controlled by the electorate or even by domestic political parties, but by forces operating beyond the country's borders. According to him, real decision making authority increasingly lies with a combination of visible foreign actors and less visible external power centres that shape outcomes through pressure, patronage, and strategic alignment. Formal institutions remain in place, but their autonomy has steadily eroded, producing a political system where sovereignty exists more as a symbol than as an operative reality.*

Within this environment, Rahman sees the Bangladesh Nationalist Party as a party that retains mass appeal but lacks internal democracy, organizational coherence, and strategic capacity. It is constrained by state pressure, vulnerable to foreign influence, and unable to effectively counter the growing strength of Islamist groups such as Jamaat e Islami. In the absence of the Awami League as a fully functioning political force, the BNP is not emerging as a decisive alternative but rather as a weakened actor navigating survival rather than leadership.

Rahman describes the present political order as marked by coercive management rather than constitutional governance. He characterizes the Yunus-led interim administration as mobocratic and legally reckless, relying on executive fiat, informal coercion, and street-level pressure to suppress opposition politics. Freedom of expression, he argues, has been sharply curtailed, with media institutions and even the judiciary subjected to intimidation, politicization, and administrative incompetence. In this setting, legal justifications function less as constitutional safeguards and more as procedural covers for repression.

On the question of foreign influence, Rahman is particularly critical of Turkey's expanding role in Bangladesh. He contends that Ankara has acted not merely as a strategic partner but as a patron of certain Islamist extremist individuals and networks, broadly aligning with Pakistan's long standing strategy of undermining a secular and pro 1971 Bangladesh. He recalls that Turkey opposed Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971 and collaborated with Pakistani forces, a historical position that continues to shape its contemporary engagement. In his view, this relationship disproportionately benefits Islamist aligned institutions rather than democratic or civic ones.

India, by contrast, is described as maintaining a consistent public position emphasizing free, fair, and inclusive elections, while avoiding overt intervention. China, despite its deep involvement in infrastructure and security cooperation, is portrayed as a largely silent actor that seeks to maximize economic and strategic gains while minimizing political risk. Rahman

suggests that Beijing may exert indirect influence through Pakistani channels, but he does not see China as actively attempting to engineer electoral outcomes. He notes, however, the historical irony that both China and the United States opposed Bangladesh's independence in 1971 while supporting the Pakistani occupation.

Pakistan's role, Rahman argues, is neither subtle nor dormant. He points to renewed diplomatic, economic, and security engagement, including direct shipping routes between Karachi and Chittagong, direct flights between Dhaka and Karachi, and discussions on military procurement and security cooperation. A steady flow of visits by Pakistani ministers, diplomats, and military officials, he says, signals a deliberate attempt to revive ideological and political networks aligned with anti 1971 narratives, anti India sentiment, and opposition to secular progressive politics in Bangladesh.

Regarding the scheduled February elections, Rahman warns that postponement remains a real possibility, citing precedents from the 2006 to 2007 political crisis. He emphasizes that deteriorating law and order, rising crime, and widespread insecurity provide convenient justifications for delay. In such a scenario, he believes those who benefit most are unelected power holders and extremist groups that thrive in prolonged uncertainty and controlled participation.

Rahman paints a bleak picture of social cohesion, arguing that the past year and a half has severely fractured Bangladeshi society. He claims the country increasingly resembles a conflict scarred state, drawing comparisons with Syria, Afghanistan, and Libya, not in scale of violence but in institutional decay and social distrust. He frames current polarization as a stark divide between pro 1971 and anti 1971 visions of Bangladesh, accusing the Yunus administration and its allies of attempting to redirect the country toward a Pakistan oriented ideological trajectory. This, he argues, directly undermines sovereignty and national survival.

In his assessment, no institution remains fully capable of mediating conflict. Confidence in the military has been badly shaken, with **General Waqr uz Zaman** and his allies accused of betraying the administration of **Sheikh Hasina.** Yet Rahman maintains that social cohesion can eventually be restored through a renewed commitment to the spirit of 1971. He believes the people themselves, rather than institutions, will ultimately drive recovery, even if the process is slow and painful.

On the role of the United States, Rahman suggests that Washington has already secured a substantial part of its agenda through a non-disclosable trade deal with Bangladesh. He argues that American ambitions under the Burma Act 2022 have been constrained by growing strategic convergence between India and China, which has limited US leverage in Burma and the Bay of Bengal. Russia, he notes, has its own strategic motivations in the Indo Pacific, underscored by **President Vladimir Putin's** visit to India and a new five-year military agreement.

Moscow's approach, in Rahman's view, closely follows India's. With a 14 billion dollar investment in Bangladesh's nuclear power sector, Russia has a strong interest in stability and democratic continuity. He emphasizes that both India and Russia were decisive supporters of Bangladesh's independence in 1971 and continue to play a broadly supportive role. By contrast, he argues that the Election Commission today has no real independence and functions largely as an administrative extension of the executive. Information about election security, surveillance, and vote management, he claims, is deliberately kept

opaque, reducing the process to what he describes as a puppet show.

Looking ahead, Rahman warns that an election lacking credibility would impose long term costs on Bangladesh's sovereignty, institutions, and regional standing. Yet he allows space for cautious optimism. Even a flawed election, he suggests, could open the door to a new beginning if followed by the lifting of restrictions on the Awami League, the restoration of political normalcy, and a national effort to curb the growth of Islamist extremist forces. For Rahman, the crisis is profound and manufactured, but not irreversible. Bangladesh's future, he concludes, still depends on whether the state and its people can reclaim the unfinished promise of 1971.

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Ashish Singh *has finished his Ph.D. coursework in political science from the NRU-HSE, Moscow, Russia. He has previously studied at Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway; and TISS, Mumbai.*

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Articles by: **Ashish Singh**