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Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Begum Khalida Zia's India visit in October-November stirred political discourses on how alignments will be made and party position stated as the country enters election mode. Each major party in Bangladesh is still trying to decipher what Khalida Zia said in India, what she said on her return and how her party leaders are explaining the change, if any, towards India to their cadres.

Among the Bangladesh watchers in India and the Indian media, the contrast between Begum Zia's visit when she was Prime Minister and her recent visit was so stark that discretions and opinions were inevitable. As Prime Minister, Begum Khalida led, perhaps, the most anti-India government ever. She was not an eager visitor then. This time around, however, Begum Khalida came with an olive branch and positions on India that bemused anyone with any interest in India-Bangladesh relations.

It was always in India's interest to be friendly with as many Bangladesh political parties, NGOs and civil society groups as possible. Partition of the sub continent created Pakistan on the west and east wings of India. Without recollecting the bloodshed and trauma of the partition, it can be said that East Pakistan (Bangladesh since 1971) continued to enjoy closer linguistic and cultural relation with eastern India, than western India with West Pakistan. This is because in the East Hindu and Muslim religious and cultural roots grew so closely together that a symbiotic merger grew. Despite all the trials and tribulations this connectivity has become unbreakable.

It must not be forgotten that the 'language movement' against West Pakistan's Urdu domination started as early as 1948, barely a year after

the birth of Pakistan. In 1952 the movement gained traction when their leaders were killed by police firing. Religion does not bind countries. But the JEI leaders in Bangladesh are blind to this cardinal truth.

It is not in India's interest, nor is India interested, in a politically divided Bangladesh. For India, such a situation would be a living nightmare. And India lived it during the BNP-JEI alliance rule from 2001 to 2006. The details are well known and recorded. Then Bangladeshi foreign minister had threatened that if India surrounds Bangladesh, Bangladesh also surrounds India. And they acted on the threat and moved to set India's north-east on fire. Despite all this India reached out to Prime Minister Begum Khalida Zia at that time, only to be spurned.

People on both sides of the India-Bangladesh border are still not convinced of Begum Khalida Zia's political sentiments expressed during the visit. It is natural. Why this somersault? Veteran Bangladeshi political commentator and columnist Harun Habib, wrote in the daily *Kaler Kantho* (Nov. 19) that Khalida Zia's time tested allies are extremists, fundamentalists and Islamists, and one should not expect anything from her statements and promises made when she was in India. Many such questions are being raised in Bangladesh.

Interestingly, since she returned home from her India visit, Begum Zia has been circumspect in her public statements on India. Senior BNP leaders are in a quandary on how to explain to the party their leader's changed position on India. One senior BNP leader ventured an explanation that the BNP's India policy had not changed and Begum Zia only highlighted the pending issues with India. BNP Standing Committee member Tarique Islam hastened to add (Nov.06) that relationship with India will be based on equality, dignity and sovereignty.

For some time now, the BNP has been trying to maintain a distance from Jamaat especially on issues related to the 1971 war of liberation and the war crimes trial. For the Jamatis and other anti-liberation groups, Sk. Hasina's determination to concentrate on war crimes while even putting aside the case on assassination attempts on her life is a dangerous signal. That would suggest that the government may try to get a verdict even before December 14, the surrender day of the Pakistani army in Dhaka to the Indian army.

If JEI leaders are convicted, and there is overwhelming evidence against them, they will be shown up as traitors to the cause of the motherland and fifth columnists. They can be washed out of Bangladesh's politics and their plan to convert the country into an Islamic Republic under Sharia law may remain unfulfilled.

The sharp rise of JEI-ICS street agitations across the country, mostly violent, indicates that the religious right wingers are on a serious war-path which can shake the country.

There are two important external influences working in Bangladesh. The US ambassador to Bangladesh, Dan Mozzena, recently suggested the government sit down with the JEI to sort out the street agitations by the latter. This obviously enraged the Awami League and its allies who retorted sharply as to how the US could ask the liberation forces to sit down with anti-liberation forces. It is unfortunate that the US would interfere in such a situation in this region, for whatever reason, because it can sprout right wing religious extremism. Terrorist

activities have been contained to a great extent, but they are alive and showing their hand from time to time.

Positions taken by human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are, sometimes, simply bewildering. They continue to be highly critical of the procedures of the war crimes trials.

The European Union (EU) have their own standards on trials and executions. This is understandable to an extent. But they must understand that the developing world, especially South Asia, is still at the position of 18th and 19th century Europe in many ways. Post World War-II and the shocking genocidal policies perpetrated by Hitler's Germany shocked the continent to seek ways forward for unity, passivity and humanity among themselves. But one must not forget the Yugoslavia disintegration and the politics of turf capture, and the blood-shed that ensued.

No one needs to be sanctimonious. The crimes of the Nazis, Italian fascists and the Japanese war machines were brought to a closure when the perpetrators were punished. Some cases took many, many years.

In the case of Bangladesh, the war crimes of 1971 have to be adjudicated and brought to a conclusion, and the guilty punished. Many attempts have been made to obfuscate the whole episode. That is why the country remains divided and always in turmoil.

The BNP must realize that along with the globalizing world, Bangladesh has changed. Economic development is the touch stone, and emancipation of women have reached new heights. Despite the JEI's opposition to liberation of women including their rights to education, assembly and national progress, the country has moved forward under the Awami League led government. Begum Zia, as a woman herself and a top leader of the nation must see other women enjoy equal rights, no matter which section or state of society they come from.

Putting aside the past, Khaleda Zia titillated the imagination of a lot of people on both sides of the border. Till now, her position has not been convincing. She and the BNP will have to prove themselves.

Returning to the JEI and like minded anti-liberation forces. Taking the contentious issue of dissolution of the caretaker government system for elections by the Awami League led government, the JEI Assistant Secretary General Mojibur Rahman issued (Nov 28) a veiled threat that if Prime Minister Sk. Hasina does not rescind the decision, it may cost her her life.

Mojibur Rahman made this statement at a gathering of BNP-led 18 party alliance. It is difficult to gauge the seriousness of Rahman's mind. But suffice it to say at least three attempts were made on Sk. Hasina's life between 2001 and 2004, and the last attempt injured her seriously. There is enough evidence with Bangladesh courts now that the assassination conspiracies were hatched by high level leaders of the BNP with JEI assistance and employing terrorists like the HUJI commander.

The BNP will have to decide whether it will go with the JEI or not. The more threatening indication is that the JEI may be planning riots and

chaos in the country to scuttle the war crimes trial. If that happens it will not only destroy Bangladesh's political and economic rejuvenation. It will impact the region and hold out a new life line to international terrorism.

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