

## PART C

### DOMESTIC INFLUENCES ON BANGLADESH'S RELATIONS WITH INDIA, 1975-1990

#### CHAPTER FIVE

##### **Military Ascendancy in Bangladesh: 1975-1981**

Between 1975 and 1981 Bangladesh's foreign policy was given a new identity. This was partly the contribution of the leader at that time, Ziaur Rahman, who came to power in a military coup on 7 November 1975. As noted in Chapter One, both internal and external influences on a state's foreign policy need to be taken into consideration, so the identification and evaluation of the significance of both the domestic and external forces at work is required. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the ways in which long-term domestic political, cultural and economic pressures in Bangladesh, themselves inextricably interwoven, have combined with specific domestic political events, such as Ziaur Rahman's rise to power, and have influenced the relationship between Bangladesh and India.

External events beyond Zia's control, such as Indira Gandhi's ousting in the 1977 Indian election, played an important part in shaping Bangladesh's foreign policy, but due to the personalised nature of Bangladeshi politics and to Zia's leadership skills, he was, at times, able to mould the state's foreign policy according to his own concerns, fears and predilections. At the same time, as will be shown below, the nature of those concerns correlated with prevailing political conditions in Bangladesh.

The notion of security, as discussed in Chapter One, is an integral part of a state's foreign policy formulation, but a closer examination of Bangladeshi foreign policy reveals that the concept of security should also encompass the personal quest for power and political dominance which may be sought by those vying for supremacy in a politically volatile state. In concentrating on the domestic influences on Bangladesh's relations with India, it would appear that Zia's overriding ambition to retain power in Bangladesh, tempered by a genuine desire to put the economically-fragile state on to the path of progress and prosperity, provided an important stimulus for the state's reorientation in

relations with India after 1975. The many obstacles which Zia faced in holding on to power, as well as his methods used to deal with those obstacles, all played an important role in shaping relations between Bangladesh and India.

This premise does not imply that the long-term political, cultural, and economic domestic influences on foreign policy should be relegated to an inferior position. Rather, the way in which such influences are interwoven with Zia's ambitions and decision-making means that pervasive domestic influences assume considerable importance.

Intrinsic differences in territorial and cultural concerns and perceptions between Bangladesh and India came to impinge upon Indo-Bangladesh relations after 1975, giving some basis to the rhetorical exchanges between the two state leaders. These differences, outlined in Chapter One, detracted from any substantial, overall development in cooperative understanding between the two states. The lack of such development prompted Marcus Franda to make this general comment on the intractable nature of South Asian interstate relations and its ever-present potential to erupt in violent conflict between the states:

One of the major disappointments in subcontinental affairs during the past few years has been the failure of India and Bangladesh to make meaningful progress toward cooperation, and of Pakistan to reconcile itself with either. Indian officials feel that Pakistanis have remained intractable - even though they themselves have acted magnanimously - in the wake of the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971. Bangladesh and India failed to resolve enough of their differences during the years following to make joint development projects or other exchanges viable...All three nations still commit themselves publicly to "normalizing relations on the subcontinent" [but] [s]hould that commitment to cooperation be too weak,...a rapid return to confrontation is quite possible.<sup>1</sup>

Zia's actions in the realm of foreign policy should be examined against this background of underlying tension. The fate of Mujibur Rahman, who had been hindered by a strong sense of obligation towards India after the Independence War and who had also sacrificed his popularity by pursuing political gain at the expense of political ethics,<sup>2</sup> served as a reminder to Zia of the limitations that existed on the exercise of power in Bangladesh. Zia's

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<sup>1</sup> M. Franda, *Bangladesh: The First Decade*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 125. It is worth noting that, according to Franda on p. 138, this comment was made in September 1975, within a few weeks of Mujib's assassination.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the reasons why Mujib's popularity plummeted, see L. Jenkins, 'The Sins of the Father', *Newsweek*, August 25, 1975, p. 11.

subsequent efforts to accommodate popular sentiment<sup>3</sup> therefore had a pervasive impact on the shaping of Bangladesh's foreign policy. This was exemplified by his early disassociation with Mujib's political affinities, opting instead for an Islamic style of government and closer ties with the international Islamic community. The change in tack was an obvious course for Zia, despite the anti-Pakistani, anti-Islamic sentiments which flourished during the Independence War. The widespread disapproval of Mujib's government had become directly tied to his pro-Indian policies and his attempts to instigate the principles of secularism and socialism, goals which were modelled on those of the Indian government.<sup>4</sup> In rejecting those goals in order to gain popular support, Zia had little option but to turn away from India as well.

The relationship between Bangladesh and India during Zia's regime therefore became characterised by the way in which that relationship shifted, in many respects, to the reverse of the one which existed previously under Mujib. Nevertheless, while a notable reworking of Bangladesh's foreign policy did occur, those changes were not clear-cut and did not necessarily mean that a fundamental change in Bangladeshi sentiments towards India had also arisen. The relative warmth existing between the two states during Mujib's regime could be described more accurately as a cooperative understanding reached between Indira Gandhi and Mujib, representing an affirmation of the essentially personal character of not only Bangladeshi, but also of South Asian politics generally.

Between 1971 and 1976, the Indian government had come to identify itself with Mujib and the Awami League, at the same time becoming accustomed to the benefits of having a grateful, agreeable leadership in

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3 The August 1975 coup against Mujib was carried out by disgruntled elements in the military, although the Majors who killed Mujib were 'used as pawns by more sophisticated political forces', L. Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution*, London, 1979, p. 102. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that those forces would have participated in the coup if Mujib had continued to receive popular support. It is therefore not surprising that Zia went to considerable lengths to cultivate mass appeal.

4 The 'four pillars' espoused by Mujib and the principles upon which the 1972 Bangladesh constitution was based were: nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy. These principles followed closely the four principles attributed to Jawaharlal Nehru of India: democracy, socialism, secularism and non-alignment. Nehru's, and hence Mujib's understanding of a 'secular' state was essentially one in which religious minority groups would have equal rights with the majority religious group. See M. Brecher, *Nehru: A Political Biography*, London, 1959, p. 621. It did not necessarily imply that the Indian or Bangladesh governments should not be based on religious principles.

neighbouring Bangladesh. The suspicions and misconceptions which existed between the two states before 1971 were scarcely kept in abeyance during Mujib's regime. A significant reason why resentment against India had not been removed in Bangladesh, despite Indian assistance during the war, was that India had confiscated all the heavy military equipment after Pakistan's defeat in 1971, leaving Bangladesh in an extremely inferior military position.<sup>5</sup> This had been widely publicised in Bangladesh and had considerable psychological repercussions at the popular level. Not only were India's actions interpreted as emphasising the inferior status of the newly independent state, but also that India simply did not think much about Bangladesh's concerns. The Indian government certainly would have taken into consideration that a Bangladesh equipped with an arsenal of Pakistani weapons might become a genuine threat to Indian security .

Another important reason for residual Bangladeshi fears about Indian intentions was the legacy of the Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty signed in March 1972, an agreement which was interpreted by many as giving India the right to interfere in Bangladesh's affairs simply if any group hostile to India should take over the Bangladesh government.<sup>6</sup> According to Lawrence Lifschultz:

Anti-Indian sentiment had been growing in Bangladesh for more than three years. The Mujib government was under heavy attack for permitting and having itself been involved in widespread rackets, including border smuggling of rice and jute to India which many Bengalis believed had brought the economy to the edge of ruin. India's training and backing of the now defunct Rakkhi Bahini, Mujib's repressive paramilitary force, aroused resentment within the army, as did the failure of India to return fully four divisions of Pakistani weapons captured in the 1971 war.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> C.H. Bateman, 'National Security and Nationalism in Bangladesh', *Asian Survey*, vol. 19, no. 8, August 1979, p. 781. According to 'numerous reports', Pakistani military equipment worth about US\$50 million was taken back to India. See M. Rashiduzzaman, 'Changing Political Patterns in Bangladesh: Internal Constraints and External Fears', in M.M. Khan and H.M Zafarullah (eds), *Politics and Bureaucracy in a New Nation: Bangladesh*, Dhaka, 1980, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> The vague wording of Article 9 of the Friendship Treaty caused greatest concern in Bangladesh because it seemed to imply that even a domestic threat to Mujib's regime could invite Indian intervention: 'Each of the high contracting parties shall refrain from giving any assistance to any third party taking part in an armed conflict against the other party. In case either party is attacked or threatened with attack, the high contracting parties shall immediately enter into mutual consultations in order to take appropriate effective measures to eliminate the threat and thus ensure the peace and security of their countries.' *Asian Recorder*, April 15-21, 1972, p. 10720.

<sup>7</sup> L. Lifschultz, 'New Delhi's 'views' on the Dacca Coups', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 28, 1975, p. 17.

Zia, on his accession to power, therefore had ample scope for the exploitation of popular fears and sentiments concerning India, and had no hesitation in doing so.

The change in the character of Bangladesh's foreign policy after 1975 was not just a consequence of the change to a militarily-backed regime. Mujib's liaison with the Indian government, combined with his efforts to consolidate personal power via one-party rule,<sup>8</sup> were viewed by many Bangladeshis as a fundamental threat to the fledgling state's precarious territorial and cultural sovereignty. A military regime, even if a factionalised one, might therefore offer greater administrative discipline and stability for a state labouring under political and economic chaos.<sup>9</sup> It was perhaps closer to the truth to say that when Zia came to power, his attempts to exploit such concerns were driven as much by necessity as ambition, a predicament which in turn added to the complex nature of Bangladesh's foreign policy during his regime. In order to strengthen his own position of authority, Zia had little option but to initiate policies which would counteract Mujib's unpopular pro-Indian stance. A contradiction thus came to permeate Bangladesh's foreign policy. On the one hand was the effort to 'look outward'; to remove India from the centre of that policy; on the other was the continual, often testy interaction which was unavoidable with such a large, powerful neighbour whose sphere of interests encompassed the entire South Asian region, and more importantly, whose approval of the new Bangladesh government was lacking. The difficulty which this contradiction presents for historical analysis is reflected in the writings on Bangladesh's relations with India during this period. Opinions fluctuate between one which stresses the complete reversal in Bangladesh's foreign policy and the other which considers that Zia made every effort to maintain harmonious relations with India. These differing approaches are represented by the following opinions.

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<sup>8</sup> In a Presidential order on 6 June 1975, Sheikh Mujib announced the creation of a national party, known as the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) which was to be the only party allowed under the Constitution. See *Asian Recorder*, July 2-8, 1975, p. 12659.

<sup>9</sup> Zillur Khan explores the process of politicisation of the armed forces in Pakistan, and subsequently Bangladesh, being stimulated particularly by the need to aid the civil administration during crises such as floods, famines and epidemics. Z.R. Khan, 'Politicization of the Bangladesh Military: A Response to Perceived Shortcomings of Civilian Government,' *Asian Survey*, vol. 21, no. 5, 1981, pp. 551-564.

After the initial travails, Ziaur Rahman demonstrated a strong desire to keep the extremists at bay and to have good relations with India....In foreign policy, Ziaur Rahman charted a new course...[b]ut he refused to adopt an anti-Indian posture.<sup>10</sup>

One remarkable feature of Bangladeshi foreign policy in the 1970s has been the shift of India from the centre to a negligent place within the foreign policy framework of Bangladesh....Once viewed as the greatest friend and ally of Bangladesh, India seemed to have become something like a hostile entity entertaining expansionist designs and hegemonic ambitions.<sup>11</sup>

Zia's regime gave its closest attention to the problems of the subcontinent, and especially to those with India.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of Zia's intentions towards India, the deep-seated distrust of India existing in Bangladesh<sup>13</sup> meant that the removal of either Mujib or Mrs Gandhi from power would almost certainly upset the precarious harmony which had been established in Indo-Bangladesh relations. In other words, the post-1975 shift in relations was not just a consequence of Zia's plans for augmenting personal power. The souring of relations had already begun with Mujib's assassination, but the deterioration was much more conspicuous once Zia sought control of the Bangladesh government, particularly as his triumph involved crushing a short-lived coup on 3 November by what were regarded as pro-Mujib, pro-Awami League forces.<sup>14</sup> The reasons for the failure of these forces, led by Khalid Musharraf, to win sufficient support would not have been lost on Zia. Within forty-eight hours of making his bid for power, Khalid Musharraf had been labelled as 'India's man' and what was even more damning, rumours had begun to circulate that India was about to invoke the Friendship Treaty to intervene on Khalid Musharraf's behalf.<sup>15</sup> Whatever course Zia took, it could not be one which would appear in Bangladesh as pro-Indian.

<sup>10</sup> A.G. Noorani, *India, the Superpowers and the Neighbours: Essays in Foreign Policy*, New Delhi, 1985, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> J. Uyangoda, 'Indo-Bangladesh Relations in the 1970s: Bangladeshi Perspectives', in S.U. Kodikara (ed.), *South Asian Strategic Issues: Sri Lankan Perspectives*, New Delhi, 1990, p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> C.P. O'Donnell, *Bangladesh: Biography of a Muslim Nation*, Boulder, 1984, p. 212.

<sup>13</sup> The reasons for this distrust have been discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>14</sup> See *New York Times*, 18 November 1975. According to A. Mascarenhas, the leader of the abortive November 3 coup, Khalid Musharraf, was unfairly accused of attempting a 'sell-out to India and restoring a Mujibist government in Bangladesh', but did nothing to dispel the charge. A. Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*, 1986, pp. 104-5.

<sup>15</sup> L. Lifschultz, 'The Crisis Has Not Passed', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 5, 1975, p. 30.

It is difficult to assess the potential for violence in Indo-Bangladesh relations after the November coups, but the escalation in tension was considerable. Political links had quickly moved away from the degree of measured cooperation which existed during Mujib's regime, a pragmatic cordiality which has been described thus:

...the period of Mujib's rule was one of careful negotiation...with the Indian government doing its best to avoid any serious confrontation but not prepared to budge on fundamental issues, and with the Bangladesh government determined to defend its interests very strongly.<sup>16</sup>

This explanation points to a level of maturity and stability having been attained in Bangladesh's relations with India, but it also indicates that those relations were finely balanced. Even Sheikh Mujib had to make some effort to appear independent of India, but for both Mujib and Zia, some degree of dependency on Bangladesh's larger and more powerful neighbour was unavoidable. The precariousness of Indo-Bangladesh relations was made obvious a few weeks after Zia came to power, with the wounding and attempted kidnapping of the Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka by anti-Indian leftists. This event could have provoked a much more threatening response from India had the wound been fatal.<sup>17</sup> The attack was naturally condemned by the Bangladesh government, but Indian outrage could have enabled that attack to provide an opportunity for forceful Indian intervention, if more serious concerns had prompted this course of action. The event even provoked international speculation concerning possible Indian involvement in Bangladesh's affairs.<sup>18</sup> Matters were not helped by the immediate, widespread assumption that the assault on the High Commissioner was an assassination attempt, rather than a

<sup>16</sup> D.A. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> For details of the attack and the Indian and Bangladeshi responses, see *New York Times*, 27 November 1975. See also *The Bangladesh Observer*, 27 November 1975. The Indian response was elsewhere reported as a condemnation of the 'dastardly attack' and the 'insidious and mischievous propaganda' carried on in Bangladesh. The Indian government also warned that 'serious consequences...might follow if this campaign was allowed to be continued'. See *The Statesman*, 27 November 1975, cited in S.S. Bindra, *Indo-Bangladesh Relations*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 42. Anthony Mascarenhas explains the attack as an attempt by members of the leftist political party, *Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal* (JSD), to take the High Commissioner hostage in return for the release of Abu Taher and other JSD leaders who had been imprisoned by Zia two weeks after the November 7 coup. See A. Mascarenhas, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> According to an article in the *New York Times*, there had been 'persistent reports [since the August 1975 coup] that India might involve itself militarily in Bangladesh'. *New York Times*, 18 November 1975.

kidnapping bid.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, while the potential for violent conflict between the two states increased greatly once Zia came to power, the existence of India's vastly superior military strength and the possible repercussions of arousing international condemnation meant that the governments of both states had much to consider before embarking on direct conflict.

A multitude of domestic and external reasons, some more influential than others, played a part in the reversal of Indo-Bangladesh relations after 1975. From a focus on domestic influences in the policy shifts, it would appear that Zia's attempts to fulfil his ambitions did play an important role. The particular combination of Zia's attempt to consolidate his position and Mrs Gandhi's antagonism towards his regime meant that until Indira lost the March 1977 election, diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and India were cold and blunt. Rhetoric, word-sparring and, at times, open border hostilities all reflected the concerns of both leaders to be seen by their respective home audiences as acting consistently with espoused political goals. Just as Zia could not afford to be seen as following in Mujib's footsteps or adopting a conciliatory stance towards India, neither could Indira Gandhi be seen to be conciliatory towards a military regime which was opposed to Mujib's goals. Mujib's political aspirations interlocked neatly with those of the Indian government.

From an international as well as a domestic perspective, Zia's concerns were tied to his determination to acquire public support and legitimise his position by instituting what would appear to be a democratic rather than a military style of government. Seeking political legitimacy would bolster attempts to secure support from the powerful and wealthy United States, and building a democratic facade over a military foundation also offered a means of circumventing or dissipating the demands of the highly politicised and faction-ridden Bangladesh military.<sup>20</sup> The situation was complicated by the public disillusionment with Mujib who, in banning all political parties but his own, was widely considered to have compromised his espoused democratic ideals. In

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19 For an account which corroborates that of A. Mascarenhas [explained above], see *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, January 16, 1976, p. 27523. See also *The Bangladesh Observer*, 27 November 1975. Even accounts published well after the event continued to use the term 'assassination' rather than 'kidnapping', e.g., see L. Ziring (ed.), *The Subcontinent in World Politics: India, Its Neighbors, and the Great Powers*, N.Y., 1978, p. 11 and P.S. Ghosh, *Cooperation and Conflict in South Asia*, New Delhi, 1989, p. 89.

20 The reasons for military politicisation in Bangladesh are numerous and complex and will be discussed in greater depth later in the chapter. They relate largely to the Independence War of 1971, and to Mujib's attempts to restrain the military.

distancing himself from the memory of Mujib's failings, Zia was at pains to reassure Bangladeshis that his democracy would be genuine, informing them that although 'in the past their rights were taken away in the name of democracy', his political programme was for 'economic development of the country' and he would 'not allow anybody to use it for personal benefit'.<sup>21</sup> Zia's determination and efforts to establish the framework of a democratic political structure were considerable, being manifested in the holding of a presidential referendum in May 1977, a presidential election in June 1978, the formation of his own political party in September 1978, and the holding of parliamentary elections in February 1979. Nevertheless, Zia's grand pledge that he would 'take the democracy to every nook and corner of the country and...lay its root deep into the heart of the people so that it...[could] make a permanent place on the soil of Bangladesh'<sup>22</sup> contrasted sharply with the reality of his emasculation of democratic procedure in the government.

The essentially authoritarian, military nature of Zia's rule was best exemplified by the content of the 1979 Fifth Amendment to the Bangladesh Constitution, which effectively subordinated the parliament to the will of the President.<sup>23</sup> By protracting and manipulating democratic processes, Zia followed a path similar to that of many other military leaders who had sought legitimacy without relinquishing power. Former leaders of Pakistan, Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan, were typical examples.<sup>24</sup> In keeping with the methods used by both these military leaders to secure their positions was the necessity, ironically, for Zia to subdue potentially substantial political opposition before

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21 *The Bangladesh Observer*, 15 August 1978.

22 *ibid.*

23 The Fifth Amendment to the Bangladesh Constitution, passed on 5 April 1979, contained many checks on the sovereignty of the parliament. In particular, it validated all proclamations and martial law orders given since August 15, 1975 and retained controversial aspects of Mujib's Fourth Amendment to the constitution by which an all-powerful presidential form of government had been introduced. See A. Haque, 'Bangladesh 1979: Cry for a Sovereign Parliament', *Asian Survey*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1980, p. 221. See also, *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh: As Modified up to 28th February, 1979*, [Dacca], [n.d.], p. 23. The military dominance of the elected National Assembly has been pointed out by Zillur Khan, who states that 30% of the representatives were 'informers of the military regime'. Z.R. Khan, *Leadership in the Least Developed Nation: Bangladesh*, Syracuse, 1983, p. 149.

24 For a comparison between Zia and Ayub, see M.M. Khan, & J.P. Thorp (eds), *Bangladesh: Society, Politics and Bureaucracy*, Dhaka, 1984, p. 107. Zillur Khan goes a step further by pointing out that Zia's efforts to militarise the government were much more subtle and sophisticated than Ayub's. Z.R. Khan, *Leadership in the Least Developed Nation: Bangladesh*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

he could venture into the realm of democratic polity. His need to crush the most powerful sources of opposition had direct and significant repercussions on Bangladesh's relations with India.

The major obstacles to Zia's plans for political control and consolidation were the Awami League, faction-ridden and reduced in prestige because of its former tie with Mujib, but nevertheless the largest and most powerful opposition party; and the leftist party, the *Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal* [JSD], the latter conditionally providing Zia with the opportunity to take control of the government in the November 7 sepyo rebellion and coup.<sup>25</sup> Both of these parties had powerful military fronts with enormous potential to undermine Zia's position in the government and in the armed forces. Zia therefore had to ensure that both the Awami League and the JSD were brought into line. This involved manipulation or imprisonment of their leaders, and even execution in the case of Abu Taher, the mastermind of the November 7 coup and Zia's most powerful rival.<sup>26</sup> Subjugation of the pro-Mujib elements in the military, as well as the suppression of Mujib's private, loyal and ruthless paramilitary force, the *Jatiyo Rakshi Bahini*, [JRB] proved more of a challenge for Zia because both of these pro-Mujib forces had fled into India after Mujib's assassination. The JRB, which had been created to serve Mujib's interests during the liberation war, represented a special threat. Its history of independence and rivalry with regard to the regular Bangladesh army and the close relationship which had been forged between the JRB forces and those of the Indian military,<sup>27</sup> meant that the JRB turned to India rather than serve those who had been responsible for or

25 The JSD had initiated a sepyo revolution in the military and reinstalled Zia as leader of the armed forces, expecting him to instigate their demands for social revolution.

26 S.S. Islam, 'The State in Bangladesh Under Zia (1975-81)', *Asian Survey*, vol. 24, no. 5, 1984, p. 568. For details of Taher's sentencing in a closed and dubious military tribunal, see *The Bangladesh Observer*, 18 July 1976. The sentence was carried out also under secrecy on 21 July 1976, to ensure that there would be no interference from Taher's supporters. A. Mascarenhas, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-7. Also, media censorship appeared to be well in place because the execution was not reported in *The Bangladesh Observer*.

27 It was normal practice for officer cadets of the JRB to travel to Dehra Dun in India [India's Sandhurst] to undergo a year-long military course. In January 1975, the force was estimated to be 25,000 [almost half of the combined strength of the Bangladesh army, navy and airforce] and Mujib's intention was to increase the figure to 130,000. Adding to the military rivalry was the enormous amount of funding provided to the JRB, while the regular army was kept on a tight budget. The JRB was also alleged to have carried out torturing of captives and killing of Mujib's political opponents. See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Power to Mujib's Private Army', 10 January, 1975.

failed to prevent Mujib's assassination. By fleeing to India, the JRB and other forces loyal to Mujib were able to receive sanctuary and military training from the Indian government and, in turn, launch a potentially powerful guerrilla campaign against Zia's regime.

In attempting to undermine remaining public support for these groups in Bangladesh, Zia drew upon an assortment of stereotypical and highly emotive images. These were given additional weight when combined with allusions to Indian hegemonistic designs, as exemplified by the following statement by Zia:

Our aim is to re-establish democracy in the country through...free and fair elections. We are committed to keep our administration firm and effective to achieve this goal....We will not tolerate any interference from any quarter that can create obstacles in the way of fulfilment of this aim....Certain circles forgetting their past misdeeds, are engaged in trying to join hands with the forces opposed to [the] country's sovereignty. These elements have clearly indicated that they are active with the help of external forces....Foreign agents engaged in conspiracy against our independence are warned that the heroic people of Bangladesh would frustrate all their evil designs. There is no place for Mirzafars<sup>28</sup> on our soil. Find out the Mirzafars and foreign agents and cooperate in inflicting adequate punishment on them. Allah is with us.<sup>29</sup>

The forcefulness of this rhetoric illustrates not only that Zia was determined to retain his new-found hold on power in Bangladesh, even to the point of antagonising the Indian government, but also that his dominant position was, in reality, a very tenuous one. The combination of Zia's efforts to expunge the threat to his authority, and the Indian government's continued assistance to the pro-Mujib guerrillas, therefore ensured that the politically tense state which arose between Bangladesh and India after Mujib's demise would, at best, continue.

The strength and cohesiveness of the pro-Mujib guerrilla forces was due, to a considerable extent, to the skilled leadership of Kader Siddiqui, a war hero who had trained Bangladeshis in techniques of guerrilla warfare during the 1971 war, and had subsequently sworn allegiance to Mujib.<sup>30</sup> Zia was well aware of the dangers which Siddiqui and his followers could present if they continued to receive Indian provisioning, training, and armaments. Hence, in

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<sup>28</sup> Also spelt 'Mir Jafar'. Mir Jafar has remained a symbol for treachery in the Bengal region because of his opportunistic arrangement with the British under Clive during the Battle of Plassey in 1757.

<sup>29</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer*, 24 November 1975.

<sup>30</sup> E. Ahamed (ed.), *Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: A Small State's Imperative*, Dhaka, 1984, p. 44. 'Tiger' Siddiqui, as he was nicknamed, was a formidable enemy for Zia because Siddiqui had sworn lifetime allegiance to Mujib. A. Mascarenhas, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

order to prevent what he naturally saw as subversive, treasonous activities which threatened his authority, Zia was forced to lock horns with the Indian government from the outset, accusing India of backing the pro-Mujib guerrilla forces which had placed Bangladesh border outposts under siege. At the very least, Zia aimed to pre-empt Indian assistance to additional anti-Zia forces. India in turn denied any involvement in what it described as a 'strictly internal matter' for Bangladesh.<sup>31</sup> The Indian response even went as far as denying that any significant violent activity was taking place on the border at all.<sup>32</sup> Such a response was in keeping with the policy of a government which disapproved of the newly installed regime in Bangladesh and could benefit only by nurturing and training forces which might become powerful enough to restore a Mujibist style of government in that state.

Because of Zia's efforts to assert his authority and subdue the border raids of the Mujibist guerrillas, the possibility of violent conflict occurring, if only at a low level, between Bangladesh and India remained high throughout the first year of Zia's regime. Zia's particular determination to round up the 'miscreants', as they were called, and India's refusal to hand them over, quickly established a pattern of relations between the two states whereby the ready resort to an orchestrated show of force rather than diplomacy was the preferred option. Zia's diplomatic skills were to be used to great advantage in the international realm, but in bilateral relations with India, his greatest concern was to be regarded at home as a vigorous protector of Bangladesh's independence, avoiding any conciliatory actions reminiscent of Mujib's pro-Indian stance.

The reality of India's military superiority did not mean that Zia would refrain from making at least some provocative or aggressive military moves against the larger state. During the first year of Zia's rule, a particularly savage border skirmish occurred in late April 1976. The Indian Border Security Force [BSF] and the Bangladesh Rifles [BDR] exchanged heavy fire with mortars and automatic weapons, resulting in an undisclosed number of casualties.<sup>33</sup> The Indian government claimed emphatically that the attack was unprovoked and that the BSF had been forced to return the fire in self-defence.<sup>34</sup> Whichever side may have been more to blame, the poor response from the Bangladesh

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31 *New York Times*, 18 November 1975.

32 *ibid.*

33 For press reports see: *Times of India* (New Delhi), 21, 22 April 1976. See also, *The Times* (London), 21 April 1976 and *New York Times*, 22 April 1976.

34 *The Times* (London), 21 April 1976.

government concerning the hostilities was indicative of just how lacking in diplomacy relations between the two states had become. According to an Indian government spokesman, 'there had been no reply from Dacca to its protest against the border incident'.<sup>35</sup> In addition, no mention of the hostilities appeared in the Dhaka daily, *The Bangladesh Observer*, illustrating the government's censoring of the media. Perhaps by suppressing reports that Bangladesh had initiated the firing, the Bangladesh government was better able to play on popular fears of Indian aggression should the Indian government decide to retaliate with greater force.

The degree of violence involved in the border skirmishes of 1976, which were closer to conventional, rather than guerrilla warfare, also appeared to act as a precedent for the border delineation disputes which became prominent after late 1979. The proven readiness of both sides to resort to military action ensured that those later challenges to what was regarded by the inhabitants of Bangladesh as the state's territorial integrity and sovereign rights would be potentially explosive. A military response by Bangladesh also indicated that despite Zia's awareness of Bangladesh's overall military weakness, he was prepared to demonstrate a readiness to use force to tackle his armed opponents sheltering in India. In other words, he considered that the risk of arousing the Indian government's ire, providing his actions stopped short of provocation at a level unacceptable to the Indian government, was subordinate to the benefits it would provide in adding to his mass appeal in Bangladesh and in strengthening his own position. He perhaps gambled that the Indian government would accept a certain degree of provocation before risking international condemnation by retaliating against the weaker state with excessive force.

The political sparring and manoeuvres carried out by the Bangladesh and Indian governments during the first year of Zia's regime exhibited variations in the character of interaction between the two states. On a superficial level, the leaders of both states brought forth the rhetoric and military posturing which would tally with popular expectations and therefore provide domestic political profit. On another level, some attempt was made by both sides to be seen to be making an effort to resolve disputes, giving a limited degree of stability to Indo-Bangladesh relations. For example, in February 1976, the Indian government finally agreed to form a joint inquiry

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35 *ibid.*

committee with Bangladesh to investigate the guerrilla border activities. While this meant that a step forward in cooperation had been achieved, the limitations of such an inquiry, and the way in which India easily held the upper hand, were obvious from the outset. The Director General of the Indian Border Security Force agreed that border instability existed and needed investigating, but he emphatically denied, even before that investigation took place, the possibility that 'any miscreants were operating from inside Indian territory or that sanctuary was being allowed to any miscreants from Bangladesh'.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the final report promised to be ready within thirty days had not been drawn up even twelve months later, and its eventual shelving could be predicted in this excerpt from an account of further border talks held in January 1977:

About the progress of the joint inquiry into border incidents as decided by Bangladesh and India at their last meeting in Dacca in February last year, the leader of the Indian team told a questioner that the work could not proceed as there were some "snags" in working out the details which he added were not desirable from his side. The BDR chief, however did not agree with him saying that if there were "snags" those were from the Indian side. The chief of the Indian Border Security force did not reply to a question whether he thought that it was necessary to go into the details of the incidents in order to establish the truth.<sup>37</sup>

The pattern of action of both governments concerning the border skirmishes showed little variation while Mrs Gandhi remained in power. Even after twelve months of intermittent border conflicts involving largely the Bangladeshi 'miscreants' and the Bangladesh Rifles, the governments of both states were making declarations virtually identical to those made when Zia first came to power and had sought to round up those pro-Mujib activists who had sheltered under the Indian umbrella. In border talks held in late January 1977, the Director General of the BDR insisted that the Indian government should dismantle the border camps of the 'miscreants' and return the occupants to Bangladesh, while in reply, the Director General of the BSF denied that any Bangladeshi guerrilla forces were being trained in India and that the BSF had any involvement in the border incidents.<sup>38</sup> In substantiating his criticism, the BDR leader pointed out that the total number of border incidents occurring over the previous eleven months was 1,316, in which 56 civilians were killed and 48 injured.<sup>39</sup> He also demanded that Kader Siddiqui's whereabouts be disclosed, commenting that 'since there was no third country between Bangladesh and

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36 *The Bangladesh Observer*, 14 February 1976.

37 *ibid.*, 30 January 1977.

38 *ibid.*

39 *ibid.*

India, then India could be the only sanctuary for Kader Siddiqui and other miscreants'. The BDR chief also considered the BSF leader to be responsible for the fact that the promised final report of the joint inquiry into the border incidents had still failed to emerge, a year after the inquiry originally took place.<sup>40</sup> Zia's persistent attempts to quell the border activities of the pro-Indian, pro-Mujib guerrillas therefore made a significant contribution towards establishing the redirection in Indo-Bangladesh diplomatic relations. Compromise and cordiality were replaced by political rhetoric and limited military engagements, both of which reflected the domestic concerns of the two state leaders. Militarily, neither side appeared willing to take matters too far, resulting in a political stalemate which had little chance of resolution, at least while Mrs Gandhi and Ziaur Rahman both remained leaders of their respective states.

The post-1975 tension in Indo-Bangladesh political rapport was nevertheless significant. It was closely associated with Zia's determination to strengthen his tenuous political position and, at the same time, to implement his chosen political programme. This shift in the relationship can be better understood against the domestic political background existing in Bangladesh. The deterioration in Indo-Bangladesh relations after 1975 may be interpreted as a reflection of the traditionally unstable character of East Bengali/Bangladeshi politics, the deep-seated factionalism within the Bangladesh military and the legacy of Mujib's treatment of the armed forces and the civil service.

If Zia was to survive politically, then it was imperative that he make every effort to assuage the resentment and disaffection which Mujib had created during his four-year rule. The factionalism which pervaded the military was an additional, but fundamental problem for Zia, one which had been exacerbated, rather than spawned by Mujib's policies. Rivalry within the Bangladesh armed forces was particularly pronounced after the Independence War, because those personnel who had been detained in Pakistan for the duration of the war had to be reabsorbed afterwards, into an army which differed greatly from the one they had known before the war. The victorious Bangladesh liberation army, the *Mukti Bahini*, had emerged with a distinctly leftist orientation, because many of those who had volunteered to join were politically-motivated students and labourers who were steeped in the secular, socialist notions of Mujib's Awami League and the more leftist political

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40 *ibid.*

parties.<sup>41</sup> After the war, the Bangladesh army therefore contained two distinct and mutually antagonistic groups: the 'returnees', who were generally higher-ranking, formally-trained and ideologically conservative military personnel who naturally presumed they would reoccupy their positions of authority within the army, regardless of whether or not they had actually fought in the war. The other faction consisted of the more radical *Mukti Bahini*, the 'freedom fighters', who had played such an important role in the emergence of Bangladesh and therefore expected to be recompensed with positions of authority and responsibility within the post-independence military. Zia himself had an affinity with both groups, being a skilled and disciplined army officer who had participated in the war, commanding and training large numbers of freedom fighters, and in the process being exposed to leftist ideology.<sup>42</sup>

Maintaining control of the government of Bangladesh was very much a case of first controlling the politicised armed forces, hence Mujib's strengthening of his own trusted paramilitary force. In patronising this elite force, Mujib added significantly to the dissatisfaction and low morale of the remaining armed forces. Being an army officer, Zia's power base was much more of a military one than that of a civilian politician like Mujib, but one which, if not kept on a tight rein, would be very unstable. The armed forces were riddled with factionalism, and they were divided fundamentally into two irreconcilable camps. Although Zia was himself a freedom fighter, it was virtually unacceptable, because of prevailing anti-Mujib and associated anti-Indian sentiments, that Zia's military support base after the November 7 coup should be comprised of forces which had once fought a war in Mujib's name. Even Abu Taher, who fought in the war but came to condemn Mujib for his dictatorial actions, acknowledged the way in which Mujib had received universal Bangladeshi civil and military support during the Independence War:

It was really tragic and painful to see Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leading personality among the founders of this state, emerge as a dictator. Mujib in his chequered political career had never compromised with autocracy or dictatorship. He was once the symbol of democracy and the national independence movement. With all his

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<sup>41</sup> For details of the socialist character of the Bangladesh liberation movement, see: T. Maniruzzaman, *Radical Politics and the Emergence of Bangladesh*, Dhaka, 1975, pp. 47-55. Maniruzzaman points out that the political orientation of those who fought in the war shifted to a position which was further left than that of the regular Awami League. See p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Committed leftist leader and fellow commander, Abu Taher, was a close friend of Zia's during the war, although after the November 7 coup, Zia chose to crush the leftist sepoxy revolutionaries and execute Taher, seeing their activities as a threat to military stability and his own plans for power consolidation.

shortcomings, he was the only leader who had links with the masses and who had a broad base among the masses. In return the people accepted him as their leader. It is the people who glorified Mujib and magnified his image as a hero....The very name of Mujib was a war cry in our Independence War. Sheikh Mujib was the leader of the masses. To deny this is to deny a fact.<sup>43</sup>

The aftermath of the November 7 coup, in which Zia found it necessary to subdue the extremist JSD,<sup>44</sup> would have provided Zia with ample confirmation that any attempt to wield power or administer largely via those who had been part of the *Mukti Bahini* would be difficult and dangerous at best.

The character of Indo-Bangladesh relations in the first months of Zia's regime was therefore shaped, to some extent, by the turmoil of domestic politics in Bangladesh and Zia's determination to strengthen his tenuous hold on power. With strong opposition coming from the secular, socialist groups, the JSD and the Awami League, Zia's choice of political direction was narrowed to one which inclined towards the remaining groups; more specifically, towards those which were based on an Islamic platform. This direction was to allow the Muslim League and Islamic groups to prosper, the very groups which had been earlier discredited, pilloried or banned for their failure to support the struggle for Bangladesh's independence or their outright support of the Pakistan army. Even Maulana Bhashani, the socialist peasant leader of the pro-Chinese National Awami Party, and whose popularity and influence had declined since independence, found Zia's Islamic umbrella to be a congenial one; one which perhaps offered him a better chance of implementing his own recipe for revolution in Bangladesh: 'Islamic Socialism'.<sup>45</sup> The same choice of Islamic direction also applied in Zia's attempts to establish military backing, whereby the essentially conservative and Islamic returnees were considered to be more supportive and controllable than the less militarily disciplined, leftist *Mukti Bahini*, despite Zia's historical affiliation with the latter group.

43 This statement was part of Taher's testimony delivered between 12 and 15 July in Dhaka Central Jail to the Special Martial Law Tribunal which sentenced him to be executed on the 21 July. See L. Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 87. For the first publication of Taher's last testimony, see L. Lifschultz, 'Abu Taher's Last Testament: Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution', *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), Special Number, August 1977, pp. 1303-1353.

44 For details of Zia's crackdown on the JSD and its revolutionary Twelve Demands, see L. Lifschultz, 'The Crisis Has Not Passed', *op. cit.*, pp. 28-34.

45 Long-time rival of Sheikh Mujib, Maulana Bhashani had become particularly outspoken against Mujib's economic mismanagement and pro-Indian policy in the last three years of Mujib's regime. For examples, see *Morning News* (Dhaka), 19 May 1973 and 15 April 1974. For Bhashani's explanation of what he meant by Islamic socialism, see *Morning News* (Dhaka), 8 August 1973.

To gain further support, Zia worked to resurrect the ineffectual and faction-ridden civil service which, like the Islamic parties, carried the stigma of collaboration with the Pakistan government before and during the war.<sup>46</sup> The bureaucracy had been further undermined after independence by Mujib and his associates who purposefully acted to restrict its power and autonomy,<sup>47</sup> creating in the process a large disgruntled group from which Zia was later able to cultivate much needed support. Again, in seeking that support, Zia was prepared to rely upon those who were either lacking in political influence or exceedingly unpopular in Bangladesh. The efforts required to make them acceptable to the Bangladeshi populace resulted in a fundamental redirection of domestic politics and, in turn, of foreign policy.

The civil and military backing which Zia acquired therefore represented an assortment of groups which seemed to have had little in common apart from their lack of mass appeal. In also sharing an antagonism towards Mujib and the Awami League, Zia's supporters could hope to counteract popular disapproval. That antagonism had become very widespread in Bangladesh, due to Mujib's failure to fulfil promises of social, economic and political reform and because of the increasingly undemocratic, dynastic character of his regime. Nevertheless, such disillusionment alone was not considered sufficient by Zia to guarantee public acceptance of those to whom he had offered patronage. An additional problem for Zia was the possibility that the extreme right-wing religious and military groups might prove to be even more difficult to control than those of the left. In order to win popular approval for himself and for those who were encouraged to participate in the new regime, Zia promoted the Islamic nature of his administration. This was done in a moderate fashion,<sup>48</sup> appealing to the Islamic traditions of Bangladesh's vast, poverty-stricken rural population, but, at the same, aiming to keep the more extreme Islamic parties in check.<sup>49</sup> A simple appeal to Islamic sentiments to promote unity and support would also resemble

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46 E. Ahamed, 'Dominant Bureaucratic Elites in Bangladesh,' in M.M. Khan, & H.M. Zafarullah, *Politics and Bureaucracy in a New Nation: Bangladesh*, Dacca, 1984, p. 150.

47 *ibid.*, p. 155.

48 It has been pointed out that Zia's Islamic emphasis was not of an extreme nature because it was based on the backlash against the discredited Awami League's secular rule rather than the rise of extreme Islamic fundamentalism. See D.A. Wright, 'Islam and Bangladeshi Polity', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, December 1987, p. 21.

49 Traditionally, the Islam practised in rural Bangladesh was of a more liberal form, being Sufi and Indic-influenced. See D. Walker, 'Islam and Nationalism in Bangladesh', *Hamdard Islamicus*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1991, p. 39.

too closely the Pakistan government's attempts to do likewise before the war. Zia's answer was to combine his Islamic exhortations with images of 'Bangladeshi' nationalism, an emphasis tailored to replace the emotive, unifying force which Mujib's appeals to Bengali consciousness had provided in the creation of Bangladesh but which had subsequently lost their relevance once independence was achieved. Zia began to promote his formula for national unity within a few months of his rise to power:

Let us all [be] Bangladeshi first and Bangladeshi last...[L]ast year's development had clearly brought out our national identity and direction that the people of the country want...Our heritage and cultural traditions which are distinct by its character must find full play in all our activities. Our goal is to make our nation strong. It must be achieved through unity, discipline, patriotism, dedication and hard work and consolidation of nationalistic spirit.<sup>50</sup>

Zia was also drawing a clear distinction between the Bengali culture of India and that of Bangladesh through his emphasis on the uniqueness of Bangladeshi culture. His intention was to promote national unity, but his move also represented a rejection of traditional Indian cultural links, adding to the increasing tension between the two states. On the same day as he delivered the above statement, Zia also made a moral appeal to Bangladeshis to follow the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad in the 'true spirit',<sup>51</sup> an entreaty vague enough to allow Zia ample scope for manipulation of public sentiments. The dual combination of appeals to Bangladeshi cultural distinctiveness and to pan-Islamic sentiments provided Zia with a potent rallying point, taking advantage of underlying anti-Hindu sentiments. It also imparted a communal tone to Indo-Bangladesh relations, contributing towards long-term adverse repercussions for Hindu-Muslim unity within Bangladesh. Zia's Islamic emphasis also ensured that a secular pro-Indian political party such as the Awami League would have a guaranteed source of support from minority groups within Bangladesh. Nevertheless, Zia's political vulnerability and restricted manoeuvrability on gaining control of the government meant that such a traditionally effective political tactic as appealing to religious sentiments would seem an attractive one to pursue.

By May 1976, the direction of Bangladesh's foreign policy and Zia's public stand towards the Indian government were firmly in place:

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<sup>50</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer*, 14 March 1976.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

Dear brothers and sisters, our people seek justice which emanates from Allah, and they must get their justice otherwise the people will fight for it...The people of our country have right to their religion. They ask for religion and want to live with religion....We want to practise our respective religion and to live under the umbrella of religion. This government of yours is determined to satisfy this requirement of the people....A handful of miscreants in our country are carrying on loot and plunder in the villages....So I want to tell you that the entire nation has to be determined to root out and destroy these miscreants [who]...claim to bring independence with foreign help....We do not want to interfere in the internal affairs of others. Likewise we want that no other country will interfere in the internal affairs of Bangladesh....But if anyone interferes in our country, the people of our country will get enraged....We have religious, historical and cultural relations with all the Muslim countries of the world and we want to further our relations with them....[Bangladesh] is a fully independent and sovereign country, and it will forever remain independent. If there is aggression on us the seven and a half-crore people of this country will rise to one man and resist it and defend the independence.<sup>52</sup>

Zia made an effective scapegoat of the Indian government by combining accusations of territorial aggression with the cry of 'Islam in danger'. This strategy not only deflected domestic criticism of his actions, but it also reinforced the notion of Bangladeshi nationalism which he was attempting to foster. Zia's ultimate aim was to accrue political prestige within Bangladesh and political leverage in the international arena. Zia risked long-term consequences, such as communal conflict and Indian retaliation, by cultivating such images of India, but his primary concerns on gaining power were immediate and domestic, requiring considerable political astuteness to maintain that power. Zia also had the advantage of being in a position to learn by Mujib's mistakes. Mujib and the Awami League had failed partly because they did not offer firm direction in the consolidation of a national identity for the people of Bangladesh. Mujib was constrained by the dilemma that too much emphasis on Bengali nationalism could be interpreted as a desire to return Bangladesh to India's fold; and, equally problematic, renouncing his secular position to exploit the potential force of Islam could suggest that the 'division of 'Islamic' Bangladesh from 'Islamic' Pakistan' had been a mistake.<sup>53</sup> The difficulty in finding an appropriate focus for national identity 'pointed to a Bangladesh unlikely to look for Indian guidance'.<sup>54</sup> In resolving the dilemma and, in turn, rallying sufficient political and popular support, Zia's most advantageous strategy was to replace Mujib's unsuccessful form of secular government with one styled along Islamic lines. It was largely because of the necessity for Zia to find a more appealing and

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 2 May 1976.

<sup>53</sup> S. Oren, 'After the Bangladesh Coups', *The World Today*, vol. 32, no. 1, January 1976, p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

unifying formula for national identity that the orientation of Bangladesh's foreign policy shifted away from India towards the Islamic states.

In his efforts to forge a new national identity for the inhabitants of Bangladesh, Zia was attempting to grapple with a problem which had been in place since the growth of Muslim separatist politics in Bengal in the nineteenth century. A simple appeal to extra-territorial notions of Islamic ideology and unity would, as demonstrated clearly by the rise of the East Bengali language movement after 1947, have been unlikely to have succeeded unless such an appeal had also sought to accommodate the opposite pull of allegiance to an indigenous Bengali culture which transcended religious affiliations. According to Asim Roy, 'the history of Bengal Muslims is, in a very real sense, a history of a perennial crisis of identity'.<sup>55</sup> Such a description may be apt as a long-term view of Bengali Muslim political history, but at the same time, it should not obscure the significance and influence of particular circumstances, such as Mujib's experimentation with a secular form of government, which has been summed up thus:

[In 1975], [t]he period of aberration in Bangladeshi polity under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was over, but there was a price which had to be paid. Part of that price was the yielding of illusions. Some were cast away lightly enough, for they were already based on ideals which had already taken a battering under Awami League rule. Secularism no longer meant anything in Bangladesh. Socialism had not worked, and there was no popular enthusiasm (and certainly no official encouragement) to rekindle the experiment....When Ziaur Rahman came to power, Bangladeshis were, if not baffled about what was expected of them in terms of political identity, then certainly disillusioned by the meagre results of the search. With the destruction of ideals by the activities of men on whom great faith had been bestowed, did the only hope of salvation lie in faith in God?<sup>56</sup>

Given the difficulty in resolving the problems associated with the issue of national identity in Bangladesh, it was therefore not surprising that it should have come to impinge on Indo-Bangladesh relations. The close cultural ties between the two states meant that the 'uniqueness' of Bangladesh had the least opportunity for expression and the very *raison d'être* of Bangladesh could have been open to question. Zia's efforts to cater to perennial Bangladeshi concerns regarding national identity represented a typical example of the way in which long-term domestic influences as well as immediate, personal domestic compulsions combined to provide foreign policy direction.

<sup>55</sup> A. Roy, 'The Bengal Muslim 'Cultural Mediators' and the Bengal Muslim Identity in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *South Asia*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1987. p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> D.A. Wright, 'Islam and Bangladeshi Polity', *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

Perhaps the most significant step taken by Zia to establish that direction, one which diverged markedly from Mujib's pro-Indian path, was to dispose of the secular orientation of the Bangladesh constitution and substitute an Islamic one instead. Secularism was deleted as one of the fundamental principles of state policy in favour of an Islamic emphasis in a constitutional amendment announced in April 1977:

'The principles of absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah, nationalism, democracy and socialism meaning economic and social justice, together with the principles derived from them as set out in this Part, shall constitute the fundamental principles of state policy....Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions'.<sup>57</sup>

In addition, the phrase: 'Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim (in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful)' was to be inserted at the beginning of the constitution. In keeping with Zia's plans to foster a more readily acceptable and more easily recognisable notion of national identity, the constitution was also modified so that the inhabitants of Bangladesh should henceforth officially be called 'Bangladeshis' rather than 'Bengalees'.<sup>58</sup> The latter description carried an Indian connotation which had, perhaps within months of Bangladesh's independence, become inappropriate. Even more specifically relevant to Indo-Bangladesh relations was the addition of the following clause to the constitution: '[t]he State shall endeavour to consolidate, preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity'.<sup>59</sup> Zia's political position was a precarious one, but in little over a year of gaining control of the Bangladesh government, he was able to strengthen that position somewhat by giving an official, legal and constitutional face to the state's Islamic orientation and redirected foreign policy.

In doing so, the benefits for Zia in consolidating his regime were considerable. First and foremost, he was able to demonstrate clearly to all that he would not be following in the disgraced Awami League's secularist footsteps. Zia could not only tap into the unifying strength of a religious and moral foundation by instituting his reforms via the constitution, but he could also be seen to be acting in some accordance with democratic procedure. The

<sup>57</sup> 'The Proclamations (Amendment) order, 1977', in *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh: As Modified up to 28th February, 1979*, pp. 153-4.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 152. See also *The Bangladesh Observer*, 23 April 1977.

<sup>59</sup> 'The Proclamations (Amendment) order, 1977', *op. cit.*, pp. 154.

opportunity to couch his criticisms of political adversaries in anti-Islamic, pro-Indian terms was also useful, as typified by his following statement:

...[T]he real Muslim should have to be [a] patriot and should have love for the people and soil. One who is engaged in subversive activities against the state and the people with the assistances from a foreign power cannot be a real Muslim.<sup>60</sup>

In essence, Zia was creating a political environment which would be least conducive to the reestablishment and nurturing of Awami League and JSD strength. In the process, he restricted any redevelopment of close diplomatic ties with the Indian government, extending a diplomatic hand of friendship to the Islamic states instead. Those Islamic states represented an appropriate, alternative source of political, moral and economic support from that which had been provided beforehand, largely by the Indian government. Throughout his regime, Zia worked via diplomacy and the cultivating of Islamic values within Bangladesh to reinforce links with all the Islamic states,<sup>61</sup> the initiative for such an orientation being clearly linked to his need to establish political strength in Bangladesh. The brief, but revealing quote above also illustrates the tenor of Zia's Islamic message: one which tempered and modified a direct religious appeal with sentiments associated with Bangladeshi territorial and cultural pride.

The shift away from an Indian focus during Zia's regime can also be interpreted through a domestic, economic perspective. In evaluating the importance of economic pressures upon Zia's choice of foreign policy direction, it is worthwhile to examine the extent to which Zia's strong stand against India might be driven by economic considerations as well. As explained above, Zia's Islamic emphasis was an essential ingredient of his political platform, providing him with much needed political strength and legitimacy in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the lure of economic advantage, to be gained by taking an Islamic stance and reaping the benefits of a hitherto largely untapped source of

<sup>60</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer*, 23 January 1978.

<sup>61</sup> For example, in May 1976, Zia attended an Islamic Foreign Minister's Conference in Istanbul and afterwards visited Saudi Arabia and Iran, returning delighted with the improved prospects for Muslim aid to Bangladesh. See *The Bangladesh Observer*, 22 May 1976. Other examples include Zia's diplomatic visit to Saudi Arabia in 1977, *ibid.*, 29 July 1977; the Iraqi Vice-President's visit to Bangladesh in 1978, *ibid.*, 4 July 1978; Zia's talks with Indonesian President, Suharto in Jakarta in 1978, *ibid.*, 29 July 1978; and in 1980, at a seminar in Dhaka organised by the World Islamic Council, Zia reiterated that Bangladesh was 'determined to work with the Islamic countries for fostering stronger Islamic unity', *ibid.*, 25 December 1980.

international financial aid, would have played some part in Zia's choice of foreign policy direction. There is no doubt that, initially, an enormous increase in financial support from Islamic states was provided to Bangladesh after Zia took control of the government. Aid from Muslim countries jumped from US\$78.9 million between 1971 and 1975 to US\$232 million obtained between 1976 and 1979. For the shorter period between 1980 and 1981, the amount received increased to US\$242.4 million.<sup>62</sup>

The domestic economic problems faced by Bangladesh throughout its history have been vast. To some degree these must be considered as a perennial influence upon the state's foreign policy dealings. The particular severity of the problem of poverty in Bangladesh<sup>63</sup> can be explained in terms which were noted in Chapter One. These included Bangladesh's comparatively underdeveloped and weak political structure, and in particular, the state having to undergo the process of extrication from colonial domination and exploitation not once, but twice, as expressed in the following comment: 'For a people to have to build a new state from scratch is unfortunate. To have to do so twice in 25 years seems almost extravagant'.<sup>64</sup> Not only have political processes in Bangladesh been doubly disadvantaged compared with other ex-colonial states, but so too has economic development, resulting in extreme economic dependency in the international arena.<sup>65</sup> The unceasing quest for foreign aid,

<sup>62</sup> Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Finance, External Resources Division, 'Flow of External Resources into Bangladesh' (as of June 30, 1981), pp. 20-22 and pp. 26-76, cited in M.M. Khan, & S.A. Husain (eds), *Bangladesh Studies: Politics, Administration, Rural Development and Foreign Policy*, Dhaka, 1986, p. 251. See also *The 1979 Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh*, Dacca, p. 346. Most of the aid came from Saudi Arabia.

<sup>63</sup> The extreme poverty of Bangladesh is best illustrated by examining the state's *per capita* GNP. In 1975, Bangladesh, along with Laos and Mali, had the lowest rate in the world, being US\$90. In the same year, India had a *per capita* income of US\$140, while Pakistan's was even higher, at US\$160. This has partly resulted from the heavy economic dependency upon agriculture, with 91.2% of Bangladesh's population living in rural areas in 1974 [as opposed to 79.4% in India]. In 1974-75, agriculture provided 63.1% of the GDP. See *The 1979 Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh*, Dacca, pp. 517, 526-8.

<sup>64</sup> H. Evans, 'Bangladesh: South Asia's Unknown Quantity', *Asian Affairs*, New Series Vol 19, October 1988, p. 309.

<sup>65</sup> The heavy dependence on foreign assistance was reflected in the Bangladesh budget for fiscal year 1979-80 (July-June), whereby it was calculated that the state's development programmes for the following fiscal year would depend for a 'relatively high' 73% of their financing on foreign aid. Also according to this budget, Bangladesh had received foreign aid commitments of US\$7.713 billion between December 1971 and June 1979. See S. Kamaluddin, 'Agriculture's Growing Pains', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 June, 1979, p. 86. According to the *New York*

the corollary of such dire domestic poverty, has been described, in Bangladesh's case, as a vital component in foreign policy formulation: '[t]he simple fact is that time could be wasted arguing the merits and demerits of accepting foreign aid, whilst the reality that it has become one cornerstone of the Bangladesh economy and, by extension, of Bangladesh's foreign policy, is ignored'.<sup>66</sup> According to E. Ahamed's interpretation, foreign aid, foreign policy and domestic policy are inseparable in Bangladesh:

"Foreign and domestic policy must be mutually supporting if national policy aspirations are to be achieved in an atmosphere of political stability". But perhaps nowhere this dictum seems more true than in Bangladesh where almost 60% of the annual budget and nearly 80% of the development budget is financed by external assistance. In Bangladesh, foreign policy really begins at home. Each year the domestic policy makers appraise the foreign policy makers of the amount of foreign aid which would be needed for that year...<sup>67</sup>

The existence of such extreme economic difficulties in Bangladesh has dictated that an equally harsh pragmatism must permeate decision-making in economic development; extremes which correlate with those of the political arena. In both economic and political spheres, therefore, either group or individual self-interest has tended to prevail, a characteristic which could also be regarded as the common ground between the political and economic realms. This intrinsic link between political and economic concerns becomes particularly obvious when considering the social and political elite class in Bangladesh, as has been explained thus:

In a state constantly gripped by economic uncertainty, burgeoning population growth and the omnipresent threat of massive natural or human induced disaster, the accumulation of money is an overwhelming preoccupation, from top to bottom of the society. Those who have wealth have access to political influence and power if they want either or both. Those who desire both wealth and political power and do not have either see the political process as the quickest and easiest means of gaining them both. Those who fail to acquire wealth generally have neither political power nor access to it.<sup>68</sup>

Considering the nexus between wealth and political power in Bangladesh, it is not surprising that economic pragmatism and expediency should co-exist with, and at times outweigh, equally pragmatic current political rhetoric.

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*Times*, June 6, 1978, Bangladesh had received, since gaining independence, nearly US\$6 billion in aid, including US\$1 billion from the United States.

<sup>66</sup> D.A. Wright, 'Bangladesh: Foreign Policy For the 1980's', *op. cit.*, p. 22-3.

<sup>67</sup> E. Ahamed (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> D.A. Wright, 'Destructive Features of Bangladeshi Political Life', *Probaho*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1991, p. 23.

Zia's search for foreign aid had deleterious consequences for Indo-Bangladesh relations, resulting in a coincidental reinforcement of the political pressures already souring relations between the two states. Once Mujib was removed from power, along with his strong sense of obligation towards Indira Gandhi's government, there existed a far greater degree of flexibility for the Bangladesh government, not only in forging diplomatic relations, but also in obtaining foreign aid.<sup>69</sup> Zia's eclectic and pragmatic approach to seeking foreign aid is typified by his statement made to the United Nations in 1980:

Somebody has got to say this first,...[s]o we say it . Where lie the surpluses? They lie with OPEC, the socialist countries and the West. All these three groups should share the effort of developing the least developed.<sup>70</sup>

The most lucrative sources of aid for Bangladesh, the United States and the prospering, oil-producing Middle East states,<sup>71</sup> were also countries with which Mrs Gandhi's government and its pro-Soviet Union orientation had little rapport.<sup>72</sup> In addition, Zia's overtures to the West were readily reciprocated. The stamp of approval is obvious in the following comment made in *The Times*, which lauded the 'inspired general fighting a nation's apathy':

Bangladesh is beginning to haul itself up by its bootstraps, and no one is tugging harder than Zia ur-Rahman, who was at the heart of the liberation struggle, emerged as leader after the coups of 1975 and has been President for almost four years....He is an expert communicator, has done more than anyone to improve the lot of women and tries to educate his people politically. There has also been a grain surplus this year....In a country where corruption is embedded he is Mr Clean. There is no whiff of corruption about him and he has a horror of nepotism.<sup>73</sup>

The broadening and expansion of diplomatic and economic ties instigated by Zia and his regime provided an additional ingredient in the deterioration of Indo-Bangladesh relations after 1975. This was especially so when such ties also came to include those of a more disquieting nature for the Indian

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<sup>69</sup> India had been a major contributor of aid to Bangladesh between 1971 and 1974, providing, for example, US\$84 million in project-aid. After 1974-5, no project-aid was committed by India, it being provided instead largely by the West, Middle Eastern states and the USSR. See *The 1979 Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh*, Dacca, pp. 347-8.

<sup>70</sup> *New York Times*, 29 August 1980.

<sup>71</sup> Particularly Saudi Arabia and OPEC. See *The 1979 Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh*, Dacca, p. 346.

<sup>72</sup> See L. Ziring, 'Pakistan and India: Politics, Personalities, and Foreign Policy', *Asian Survey*, vol. 18, no. 7, 1978, p. 711, and L. Ziring (ed.), *The Subcontinent in World Politics: India, Its Neighbors, and the Great Powers*, op. cit., p. 116.

<sup>73</sup> *The Times* (London), 19 March 1981.

government: improved Bangladeshi diplomatic relations with Indian arch rivals, Pakistan<sup>74</sup> and China.<sup>75</sup>

Another economic development occurring within Bangladesh, after Zia came to power, contributed towards the distancing between Bangladesh and India: his campaign to reduce the flourishing smuggling trade between the two states. The economically disastrous post-independence years during Mujib's regime had encouraged the smuggling trade, an activity which drained the state financially,<sup>76</sup> and which was regarded in Bangladesh as being fostered by India since the latter was seen as the primary beneficiary.<sup>77</sup> By clamping down on smuggling activities, identifying them as a symptom of Indian interference, Zia appeased in the short term, but also reinforced, deep-seated Bangladeshi fears of Hindu economic exploitation. His declarations that 'the people of Bangladesh had achieved liberation through armed struggle for their economic emancipation and progress',<sup>78</sup> and that 'the corrupt elements, smugglers and miscreants were the enemies of the nation' were aimed at much more than simply attempting to remedy Bangladesh's economic plight, representing, rather, a skilful political manipulation of the Bangladeshi populace. By placing the smuggling trade in the same categories as the pro-Indian 'miscreant' forces and Indian domination, he could appear to be salving economic problems, but at the same time strengthening his power base by associating his opponents with corrupt practices. Zia's personal reputation for material austerity and financial incorruptibility<sup>79</sup> no doubt further heightened the contrast he wished to cultivate between himself and his foes. He also made at least some impression on reducing the pervasive smuggling activities,<sup>80</sup> but the political

<sup>74</sup> For details of the speedy reconciliation between Bangladesh and Pakistan once Zia had come to power, see *New York Times*, 2 February 1976.

<sup>75</sup> Within days of the November 7 coup, China extended its 'warm support to the new Government of Bangladesh'. See *The Bangladesh Observer*, 12 November 1975. In April 1977, following Zia's successful goodwill tour of China in January [during which an economic and technical agreement was signed], Premier of the People's Republic of China, Hua Kuo-feng, expressed confidence that 'the friendly relations and co-operations between China and Bangladesh would increasingly grow in strength and develop through joint efforts of their two Governments and peoples', *The Bangladesh Observer*, 8 April 1977. See also *ibid.*, 4 January 1977.

<sup>76</sup> Due to the smuggling of raw jute into India, Bangladesh was believed to have lost about US\$50 million in foreign exchange in those years. See M. Rashiduzzaman, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>77</sup> L. Ziring (ed.), *The Subcontinent in World Politics: India, Its Neighbors, and the Great Powers*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer*, 26 January 1977.

<sup>79</sup> See *The Times* (London), 19 March 1981.

<sup>80</sup> *New York Times*, 4 October 1976.

overtone of his campaign added to the deterioration in Indo-Bangladesh relations.

It can be shown that the economic orientation of Zia's regime contributed towards the distancing between Bangladesh and India, but economic interests also ensured that at least some bounds would keep the antagonism between the two in check. Examination of Indo-Bangladesh economic relations during Zia's regime reveals that economic links operated in a sphere which, in some ways, can be regarded as independent of that in which Zia's political predicament required an anti-Indian stand. A statistical account of trade between Bangladesh and India does show that an overall decline occurred during Zia's regime, as illustrated in Table 2 concerning Indo-Bangladesh trade between 1973 and 1981:

**Table 2. Bangladesh's Imports from and Exports to India (million US dollars)**

	<b>1973</b>	<b>1974</b>	<b>1975</b>	<b>1976</b>	<b>1977</b>	<b>1978</b>	<b>1979</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1981</b>
<b>Import</b>	114.8	82.0	83.3	62.7	48.9	43.0	40.0	55.6	64.0
<b>Export</b>	23.3	0.4	5.3	7.1	0.6	2.3	12.1	8.0	20.2

Source: United Nations. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific: 1982*. Bangkok, n.d., p. 94.

These statistics show that a reduction in trade with India began after 1973, prompting questions as to why it occurred. C.J. Gulati interprets the above statistics as being proof that the fluctuations in economic relations between India and Bangladesh were largely politically driven, concluding that the 'political turmoil in Bangladesh and friction-ridden Indo-Bangladesh relations have obstructed worthwhile [economic] cooperation'.<sup>81</sup> While the statistical evidence seems to imply that economic relations between India and Bangladesh have been moulded by Bangladesh's domestic political strife, the link becomes less clear when other possible causes are considered. A reduction in trade between the two states could be explained in a variety of ways, apart from being perceived as largely a reflection of political necessity and diplomatic reorientation deriving mostly from Bangladesh. The dictates of economic

<sup>81</sup> C.J. Gulati, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

pragmatism in poverty-stricken Bangladesh also played an integral part, or, as expressed by Rehman Sobhan, 'the compulsion of needs and politics did not always fully coincide'.<sup>82</sup> As noted above, Ziaur Rahman sought more lucrative and assured economic ties for Bangladesh, particularly by approaching the US and the OPEC states.<sup>83</sup> The difficulties in establishing stable and mutually beneficial economic relations between Bangladesh and India had already become apparent during Mujib's regime,<sup>84</sup> so it was not surprising that Zia sought additional options for the economic development of Bangladesh. India's substantial post-war aid to Bangladesh<sup>85</sup> and Indian efforts to bolster Bangladesh's economy during Mujib's regime could not be sustained indefinitely, especially as both states had competing major exports, such as jute and tea.<sup>86</sup> The political motive for India to ensure the fledgling state's viability by providing economic support also played a considerable part in creating an early impression of firm economic relations between the two.<sup>87</sup> In addition to the inevitable decline in Indian economic assistance, Bangladesh's post-liberation expectations of substantial economic assistance from the USSR were unfulfilled, thereby further encouraging a return to pre-Independence economic links which were traditionally based outside the Indo-Soviet sphere.<sup>88</sup>

The deterioration in economic links between India and Bangladesh had already begun before Ziaur Rahman came to power, the fluctuations and decline resulting from a wide variety of causes. Once Zia came to power, efforts to develop economic cooperation between Bangladesh and India were not abandoned, and in contrast to the political friction occurring between the two states after Zia's coup, a substantial trade agreement was signed between the two countries in January 1976. Under this agreement, the three-year decline in

<sup>82</sup> R. Sobhan, *The Crisis of External Dependence: The Political Economy of Foreign Aid To Bangladesh*, London, 1982, p. 125.

<sup>83</sup> According to Rehman Sobhan, the OPEC states have 'invariably' given untied aid to Bangladesh, allowing Bangladesh to retain maximum flexibility in investment decisions. R. Sobhan, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>84</sup> R. Sobhan, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-153. Sobhan has provided an astute and balanced assessment of Indo-Bangladesh economic relations in the 1970s, bringing out the complex tie between political and economic considerations in those relations.

<sup>85</sup> Indian aid to Bangladesh between December 1971 and June 1972 totalled US\$222.7 million, sufficient to avert an impending famine. R. Sobhan, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>86</sup> In the late 1970s, Indian jute exports were actually losing ground in the world market due to competition from supplies and synthetic substitutes from Bangladesh. See Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (comp.) *India. A Reference Annual: 1982*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 344.

<sup>87</sup> R. Sobhan, *op. cit.*, pp. 140, 142.

<sup>88</sup> For details of why this occurred, see R. Sobhan, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

trade between the two states was to be reversed and the trade imbalance reduced, with India agreeing to supply coal at a cheaper price than before, and to increase its imports of jute, fish and newsprint from Bangladesh.<sup>89</sup> The signing of such an accommodating agreement,<sup>90</sup> at a time when political events occurring in Bangladesh were prompting an angry and indignant response from the Indian government, meant that the tension between the two states was not as deep-seated as it appeared, being manifested to a greater extent in the form of political rhetoric.

Under the Janata regime,<sup>91</sup> which portrayed itself as more accommodating towards the neighbouring states than Mrs Gandhi had been, further trade concessions were made by India to Bangladesh in 1978, following the 1976 Bangkok Agreement on trade expansion and economic co-operation among the developing countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). At talks held in Dhaka in June 1978, India accepted almost all the import and export modifications proposed by the Bangladesh government.<sup>92</sup> Even after Mrs Gandhi returned to power in 1980, trading links between the two states did not appear to suffer a marked deterioration. Another three-year trade agreement between India and Bangladesh was signed on 4 October 1980, one which was considered to fulfil 'the need for exploring all possibilities for expansion and promotion of mutually advantageous trade between the two countries'.<sup>93</sup> This agreement indicated that prevailing political tensions existing between Bangladesh and India,

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89 *The Bangladesh Observer*, 13 January 1976. See also *Times of India* (New Delhi), 13 January 1976. According to the report in the *Times of India*, trade had declined sharply over the preceding three years, Indian exports to Bangladesh falling from Rs. 58.78 crores in 1973-74 to Rs. 42.17 crores in 1974-75 and Rs. 16.50 crores between July and December, 1975. The decline in trade and the trade imbalance are also revealed in the imports from Bangladesh which fell from Rs. 17.05 crores in 1973-74 to Rs. 9.18 crores in 1974-75 and Rs. 90 lakhs between July and December 1975. The leader of the Bangladesh delegation at the talks, M. Nurul Islam, expressed his satisfaction with the 'definite, concrete and positive steps' which had been taken at the talks.

90 The trade agreement was especially congenial for poorer Bangladesh. India's decision to increase imports from Bangladesh was a reasonably magnanimous gesture because those goods were either already over-supplied or had had problems with price and quality control. See *Times of India* (New Delhi), 13 January 1976.

91 Morarji Desai and the Janata coalition party came to power in India in March 1977, ousting Mrs Gandhi in the national elections.

92 *Asian Recorder*, June 25-July 1, 1978, p. 14373.

93 *ibid.*, November 25 - December 1, 1980, p. 15759.

sufficient to receive international attention,<sup>94</sup> did not automatically put a stop to trading links between the two states.

Whether or not the trade agreements actually managed to solve, in the long term, some of the trading imbalance problems between the two states has little bearing on the fact that these developments could take place in the midst of politically antagonistic periods in Indo-Bangladesh relations. The difficulty in finding an obvious correlation between economic policy and domestic political pressures can be illustrated further by arguing that Mujib's pro-Indian Awami League regime, eventually synonymous to many in Bangladesh with corruption, smuggling and Indian economic exploitation, impaired Indo-Bangladesh relations.<sup>95</sup> By contrast, Ziaur Rahman's anti-Indian foreign policy stance acted to reduce the economically debilitating effects of smuggling, and did not prevent the fostering of some improvement in economic relations between Bangladesh and India. The interplay between political and economic interests and the repercussions for Indo-Bangladesh relations are therefore not easily clarified by a reliance upon statistical evidence.

While trade did continue to decline between Bangladesh and India after Zia came to power, it appears that economic relations were less a source of friction between the two states. The signing of the various trade agreements with India between 1976 and 1980 indicates that Zia's efforts to obtain financial aid from the United States<sup>96</sup> and the Middle East were driven more by economic necessity than by a determination to achieve a broad severance of ties with India. Zia's public sentiments were aimed at portraying an independent Bangladesh which was leaving India's fold, but at the same time, economic

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94 Such as those associated with disputes over territory and the checking of illegal Bangladeshi immigration into India. For example, see *New York Times* (New York), 28 October 1980, for a comment on India's revived 'anti-immigrant drive'.

95 Particularly by arousing entrenched fears of colonial exploitation, as had been carried out by West Pakistan before 1971. See I. Hossain, 'Bangladesh-India Relations: Issues and Problems', *Asian Survey*, vol. 21, no. 11, 1981, pp. 1116-7. According to Hossain, Mujib's trade pact with India was ostensibly aimed to promote trade between the two states, but in reality, resulted in large scale smuggling. *ibid.*, p. 1117.

96 A large increase in aid from the United States was obtained by Zia, particularly from 1976 to 1979, where US\$648.1 million was received, as opposed to US\$379.5 million provided during the preceding years between 1971 and 1975. See Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Finance, External Resources Division, 'Flow of External Resources into Bangladesh, as of June 30, 1981', pp. 20-22 and 26-76, cited in, M.M. Khan, & S.A. Husain (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 251-2.

pressures also ensured that trading links between the two states continued to function despite foreign policy orientation and political rhetoric.

The push and pull of economic demands existing alongside political considerations in Indo-Bangladesh relations demonstrates that both political and economic aspirations and activities need to be taken into account in the broader assessment of those relations. The post-1975 trading agreements between Bangladesh and India indicate that while the antagonism which characterised Indo-Bangladesh relations after Zia's rise to power was considerable, the antipathy did not have the same dimensions as that which had evolved between India and Pakistan, despite Mrs Gandhi's tendency to interpret the 1975 military coups in Bangladesh as of Pakistani origin.<sup>97</sup> Whereas the history of tension between India and Pakistan dictated that both diplomatic and economic links between the two should be minimal, Bangladesh's economic plight, particularly after the 1974 famine, meant that economic needs would have been more likely to counter the political ambitions and strategies of the ruling elite. At the same time, attempting to find the economic determinants of Bangladesh's relations with India shows that political and economic considerations are impossible to separate clearly. The following comment by Henry Kissinger illustrates some of the possible reasons why the links between political and economic pressures in Bangladesh have been contradictory, blurred and difficult to define:

But to the charismatic heads of many of the new nations, economic progress, while not unwelcome, offers too limited a scope for their ambitions. It can be achieved only by slow, painful, highly technical measures which contrast with the heroic exertions of the struggle for independence. Results are long delayed; credit for them cannot be clearly established....Economic advance disrupts the traditional political structure. It thus places constant pressures on the incumbent leaders to re-establish the legitimacy of their rule. For this purpose a dramatic foreign policy is particularly apt. Many leaders of the new countries seem convinced that an adventurous foreign policy will not harm prospects for economic development and may even foster it.<sup>98</sup>

An evaluation of the significance of domestic economic pressures upon Bangladesh's foreign policy reemphasises the inadequacy of isolating a single aspect, such as Bangladesh's domestic turmoil, as having the greatest influence. Even applying a very broad definition of foreign policy, such as that which focuses on the drive for state self-preservation being of overriding

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<sup>97</sup> See *New York Times*, 31 December 1975.

<sup>98</sup> H.A. Kissinger, 'Domestic Structure and Foreign Policy', in J.N. Rosenau, *International Politics and Foreign Policy: A Reader in Research and Theory*, New York, 1969, p. 272.

concern, seems idealistic and inappropriate when considering the course of Indo-Bangladesh relations. According to E. Ahamed, Bangladesh's foreign policy can be defined thus:

As it is true for all other states, self-preservation is the most vital interest of Bangladesh....[T]he question of self-preservation takes precedence to all other considerations in Bangladesh.<sup>99</sup>

Choosing to give precedence to this aspect, that of national self-interest, is a standard approach of many foreign policy studies. For a relatively new state such as Bangladesh, any challenge to its sovereignty, no matter how slight, has exaggerated importance to the inhabitants. Nevertheless, the precise meaning of the expression, 'state self-preservation', is unclear. The implication is that the state, as an entity, has a unity of purpose and a well-developed political structure; a generalisation which cannot be sustained in the case of Bangladesh. In studying the preconditions which led to Ziaur Rahman's stand against the Indian government, the notion of self-preservation does appear to have played an important part, but more in a personal, individual sense. Zia's accession to power and the consolidation of his political position were achieved against very difficult odds. His early political options were restricted considerably as he attempted to manoeuvre between and eventually triumph over the various political and military factions, particularly those headed by the Awami League, Khalid Musharraf and Abu Taher. Combined with Zia's struggle to achieve and maintain supremacy was also his sincere belief that his policies would help to solve Bangladesh's political and economic strife.

Individual political machinations and aspirations, such as those of Ziaur Rahman, have tended to reflect the inherent structure of Bangladeshi polity, where sudden changes of leadership, intense rivalry, factionalism, personality cults and the threat of assassination were, and still are, ever present. This invites the question of how much influence individual self-interest has over these entrenched characteristics. The following viewpoint provides one possible answer:

...[W]here the cult of personality predominates, the political parties themselves, even that of the leader, may be peripheral to the entire decision-making process. It may well be too, that the conceptions behind the ideas of the leader may not be very relevant, for real power-broking may circumvent ideas. Indeed, there is some argument for saying that leadership is somewhat irrelevant to Bangladeshi politics, except where leadership simply operates according to crudely pragmatic motives, such as is now occurring in

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<sup>99</sup> E. Ahamed (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Bangladesh. Given the strength of inherent features, there is a case to be made for this opinion.<sup>100</sup>

Given the notable shift in foreign policy direction once Zia came to power, it would be very difficult to discount the strength of his individual concerns and actions. At the same time, nevertheless, he was virtually compelled to follow a course dictated by the inherently unstable character of Bangladeshi polity. It is impossible to isolate any single political, economic or cultural determinant which is applicable to all aspects of Bangladesh's interstate relations. The aim of this chapter has been to illustrate the interacting pressures upon Indo-Bangladesh relations, and in so doing, to draw out the unique as well as the general characteristics of that relationship.

If the 'norm' in South Asian interstate relations can be described as linkages infused by enmity and rivalry, rather than amity,<sup>101</sup> then domestic political events succeeding Mujibur Rahman's assassination resulted emphatically in a reassertion of that norm. For a brief period, the Bangladesh and Indian governments had exhibited a semblance of compatibility in national outlook, a characteristic which quickly succumbed to a variety of divisive influences. Mujib himself played a part in refuelling Bengali Muslim fears of Indian interference by instituting an autocratic, corrupt and inefficient regime which was identified partly by its sense of indebtedness towards Indira Gandhi's government. Zia, on becoming leader of the Bangladesh government, was able to strengthen his precarious political position by exploiting Bangladeshi disillusionment with Mujib's regime and fostering long-standing fears and insecurities with regard to Indian dominance in South Asia. India provided Zia with the perfect scapegoat to absorb domestic discontent and turn it into an asset. Combining this political tactic with one which offered a firm direction in national identity, Zia was able to boost his popular appeal and offset some of the inherent weaknesses of his hold on power. In particular, he was able to reduce the undermining effects of prevalent military and political factionalism in Bangladesh, and deflect criticism of misdemeanours perpetrated in the past by his political support groups.

The need for Zia to cultivate popular appeal was especially important in Bangladesh for a variety of reasons, quite apart from the ineffectual attempts to

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<sup>100</sup> D.A. Wright, 'Destructive Features of Bangladeshi Political Life', *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>101</sup> B. Buzan (et al.), *South Asian Insecurity and the Great Powers*, New York, 1986, pp. 7-8.

institute a genuinely democratic system of government. Perhaps the most significant reason was the widely politicised character of the population, particularly within the peasantry, student groups, the middle classes, the urban elite and the military. These groups had responded to the rallying efforts of Mujib and Maulana Bhashani in particular, over the previous two decades, and had played an important role in resisting the Pakistan forces in the Independence War. The messianic, hallowed status awarded to the most influential leaders of East Bengali politics, at least while at their peak of popularity, virtually dictated that Zia would also be placed in this mould and be bound by the expectations which accompanied such a role.

In a similar fashion, Indira Gandhi was limited by popular expectations and the strength of political tradition, which, in India, centred on ideological images of civilian rule, democracy, secularism and regional dominance. These images were reinforced when contrasted with Bangladesh's militaristic, authoritarian and communalist regime, which Mrs Gandhi perceived Zia's rule to be. Regardless of the necessity for both leaders to accommodate domestic political demands, Mrs Gandhi's position, backed by a well-established political structure, was relatively secure compared with that of Zia. Despite this advantage, not to mention that of overwhelming military supremacy, the Indian government's public reactions of bellicosity and suspicion towards Zia's regime apparently limited the sphere of diplomacy. These responses could be described as typical of post-Partition South Asian interstate relations where characteristics such as insecurity, instinctiveness, over-reaction, brinkmanship and aggression had been predominant. Tempering these reactions, in the case of Indo-Bangladesh relations, were the tangential economic links between the two states, ties which suggested that the political and the economic dimensions were not wholly dependent upon each other.

While the Indian government's foreign policy concerns therefore reflected a preoccupation with regional influence, those of Zia and his regime represented largely the struggle for domestic political survival and acceptance. The methods by which Zia achieved his preeminent political position in Bangladesh ensured that the heightened souring of Indo-Bangladesh political relations after Mujib's assassination would have been unlikely to diminish. Moreover, many of the political problems which beset Zia on his accession, and which had played such an influential role in impairing Indo-Bangladesh

relations, continued to apply throughout his regime.<sup>102</sup> Zia's attempts to manipulate and counteract the limitations on his domestic political options resulted in far more freedom to manoeuvre, but in the realm of foreign, rather than domestic, policy. Unlike Mujib, Zia was able to pursue a foreign policy which was not encumbered by gratitude towards the Indian government, developing into a policy which might extend beyond the boundaries of Indian approval. Nevertheless, political necessity and pragmatism modified his dealings with the Indian government to some extent. Continued economic links with India indicated that the deterioration in relations between the two states was not all-encompassing, relations being guided by pressures apart from those deriving from Bangladesh's domestic political turmoil. Further tempering relations between the two states was the possibility that an excessively defiant stance taken by the Bangladesh government towards its powerful neighbour could have provoked an Indian military response which, at the very least, might have ousted the troublesome regime from power.

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<sup>102</sup> According to Lawrence Ziring, approximately twenty-six coup attempts occurred during Zia's rule, culminating in his assassination by a disgruntled military officer in May 1981. See L. Ziring, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad, An Interpretive Study*, Oxford, 1992, pp. 140-1.

## PART C

### DOMESTIC INFLUENCES ON BANGLADESH'S RELATIONS WITH INDIA, 1975-1990

#### CHAPTER SIX

##### **Political Manoeuvres and Ethnic Violence: 1982-1990**

This chapter examines the impact of selected domestic events on Indo-Bangladesh relations during Hussain Muhammad Ershad's regime, as part of the overall evaluation of the domestic and external determinants of Bangladesh's foreign relations. External pressures exerted on relations with India during this period have already been discussed in detail,<sup>1</sup> but domestic pressures also helped to shape Bangladesh's relations with India during Ershad's regime. Aspects of three issues have been selected as appropriate examples for analysis: Ershad's assumption of power; the Farakka barrage dispute; and the hill people insurgency occurring in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of southeast Bangladesh.

As with Ziaur Rahman, Hussain Muhammad Ershad's successful bid for leadership of Bangladesh influenced the course of Indo-Bangladesh relations, although to a more limited extent. Both leaders commenced their regimes via a military coup, but with differing reactions from India, further countering the common argument that relations were soured because of the shift to military rule in Bangladesh.

For those attempting to achieve supremacy in the wake of Zia's assassination in May 1981, political life remained volatile and precarious, although certain conditions offered advantages for an ambitious and shrewd individual such as Ershad. Ziaur Rahman's instinctive and vulnerable bid for leadership was made in highly dangerous circumstances, and in the face of Indian disapproval and indignation. Ershad, by contrast, had ample time to choose an opportune moment to take over the reins of government, an advantage which also minimised the risk of provoking Indian antagonism and interference. Ershad's initial decision to support the establishment of a civilian government following Zia's assassination aroused speculation in the Indian

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapters Three and Four.

media that his 'mysterious' failure to seize power at that time was intended to 'cover up something'.<sup>2</sup>

Ershad was clearly regarded with some degree of suspicion in India, but his choice, or opportunity, to 'postpone' the expected coup proved to be an astute move which offered much greater scope for political gain, and in turn, smoothed Bangladesh's relations with India. There was a variety of domestic reasons why Ershad's eventual ousting of Bangladesh's civilian regime in 1982 occurred with little domestic opposition and hence ameliorated India's response.

Historical precedent had shown that the most dangerous threat facing a leader of Bangladesh usually came from within the military. Zia's unceasing efforts to eradicate powerful military opposition, exemplified by the thwarting of at least twenty attempts to overthrow his regime,<sup>3</sup> did not prevent his assassination from within the military.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, by means of execution and imprisonment, Zia had thinned and weakened the ranks of the most troublesome military factions, leaving the group which he had come to favour the most, the repatriates, in by far the most powerful position.<sup>5</sup> Being a member of the repatriate group, Ershad was able to reap the benefit of Zia's efforts to curb military opposition, bringing to heel with little difficulty those who had played a role in Zia's demise. Consequently, Ershad was under little pressure to stage a coup and enforce martial law at that particular time.

Ershad also had to take into account the prevalent, heightened public fear of the military and its violent and politically obtrusive factionalism which had culminated in Zia's assassination.<sup>6</sup> In being able to delay a bid for direct leadership, Ershad was able to concentrate on the task of consolidating his position as leader of the armed forces and, at the same time, minimise civilian apprehension. Ershad's attempt to deal with both of those problems was encapsulated in his open commitment to ensure that the military be given a

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2 Editorial, *Times of India* (New Delhi), 25 March 1982.

3 L. Ziring, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad, An Interpretive Study*, Oxford, 1992, p. 140.

4 While there is still some controversy over the subject, the official explanation was that a disgruntled Freedom Fighter officer, Muhammad Abul Manzur, along with a small group of supporting officers, carried out the assassination. See A. Mascarenhas, *A Legacy of Blood*, London, 1986, pp. 160-183.

5 L. Ziring, *op. cit.*, Oxford, 1992, p. 144.

6 S. Hassan, 'Transitional Politics In Bangladesh: A Study of Sattar's Interim Presidency', *India Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3, 1983, p. 264.

decision-making, stabilising role in Bangladeshi political life,<sup>7</sup> governed by constitutional means and theoretically subject to popular approval.

In being able to choose the timing of his coup, Ershad had more scope to play upon political divisions which were bound to surface in the wake of a government which had been moulded around Zia's specific goals and ambitions. It was far more pragmatic for Ershad to allow Acting President Abdus Sattar's civilian government to bear the burden of trying to follow in Zia's idolised, martyred footsteps,<sup>8</sup> and to let Sattar run the risk of losing popularity if unsuccessful. Sattar's failure was a probability.<sup>9</sup> The ensuing necessity to restore political and economic stability would then have been used to justify a declaration of martial law, the earlier prospect of which had been viewed widely with alarm.

This type of strategy was used effectively by Ershad. In a style reminiscent of that pursued by former Pakistan President, Muhammad Ayub Khan in 1958, Ershad opted finally to impose martial law on the grounds that the civil administration was no longer able to function effectively and 'wanton corruption at all levels had become permissible as part of life, causing unbearable sufferings to the people'.<sup>10</sup> Sattar's regime and the opposition parties had both been plagued by intra-party squabbling and political disarray, and consequently had failed to galvanise popular confidence and support.<sup>11</sup> The picture of Bangladesh's general prospects was perhaps not as dire as Ershad's rhetoric portrayed,<sup>12</sup> depicting images of a nation having been gripped by an 'extreme crisis' since Zia's death.<sup>13</sup> Ershad's actions were also driven by

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7 This issue had intensified due to Zia's civilianising policies. See Z.R. Khan, 'Bangladesh in 1981: Change, Stability, and Leadership', *Asian Survey*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1982, p. 165.

8 According to S. Hassan, Zia's 'youth, vigour and dedication had earned him the respect of his countrymen' and his sudden death had thrown the country into 'chaos and uncertainty', leaving Sattar's interim government with little option but to 'honour Zia's international commitments and carry forward his domestic policies and objectives'. S. Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

9 The fragility of Sattar's position is revealed, for example, in the comment by Marcus Franda that Zia's death had occurred 'at a point when things had started to go sour but had not yet deteriorated'. M. Franda, *Bangladesh: The First Decade*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 324.

10 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 25 March 1982.

11 M.A. Rahman, 'Bangladesh in 1983: A Turning Point for the Military', *Asian Survey*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1984, p. 151.

12 M. Ataur Rahman points out that while 'political, economic and social conditions' were 'fast deteriorating' under Sattar, popular acceptance of Ershad's coup had resulted more from widespread disillusionment with Sattar's 'uninspiring' regime than anything else. M.A. Rahman, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

13 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 25 March 1982.

the fact that after Sattar's sweeping election victory in November 1981, the President had felt secure enough to take a stronger stance against Ershad and the military, denying that the army was entitled to a share in governing the country.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, popular disillusionment with prevailing political conditions had been increasing,<sup>15</sup> prompting Ershad to initiate his bloodless coup while the civilian mood was comparatively favourable, and before Sattar could consolidate his own regime and become more obstructive.

Both the domestic and regional political circumstances which existed at the establishment of Zia's and Ershad's regimes were therefore of considerable contrast. The methods by which both military leaders sought to manipulate or adapt to those conditions also differed, of necessity. These differences were reflected in the fluctuating course of Indo-Bangladesh relations. Unlike Zia, Ershad did not have to deal with excessive opposition or resort to violent means to stage his coup. Ershad therefore had the opportunity to implement his political designs in a cautious, deliberative and methodical manner, synchronising his coup with the most politically advantageous domestic and regional conditions. Ershad's comparatively assured bid for leadership did not require a radical change in foreign policy direction, such as had accompanied Zia's more turbulent debut as leader of Bangladesh. While Zia was obliged to carry out sweeping foreign policy changes, Ershad was in a position to draw upon Zia's accomplishments, and consolidate the more effective changes which had already been put in place by his military predecessor, rather than having to run the risk of trying an untested path.

As discussed in Chapter Three, a temporary upswing occurred in 1981-2 in the cordiality of Indo-Bangladesh relations.<sup>16</sup> Ershad's assumption of power was not the primary cause of the improvement, but neither did it impair relations, in sharp contrast to the downturn following Zia's coup in 1975. Ershad's effective manipulation of prevailing domestic political conditions in staging his coup reinforced, rather than undermined the cordiality. In fact, the reaction by the Indian press to the non-violent coup could be described as favourable and optimistic.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the auspicious beginning, relations between the two states did not strengthen to a significant extent during Ershad's regime. Some of the

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14 M.A. Rahman, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

15 *ibid.*, p. 151.

16 See also Chapter Three.

17 *Times of India*, 25 March 1982.

reasons have been examined elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> but domestically, it was partly due to Ershad's growing emphasis on cultivating the concept of Islamic identity in Bangladesh, and correspondingly, placing a greater emphasis on developing links with fellow Muslim countries.<sup>19</sup> His increasingly Islamic orientation in governance culminated in the official declaration of Islam as the state religion in June 1988.<sup>20</sup>

Even a brief analysis of India's differing responses to the two military coups underlines the extreme difficulty in isolating specific causes, whether domestic or external, which have moulded relations between Bangladesh and India. The argument that regime compatibility is a prerequisite for stable and cordial foreign relations is commonly applied to these two states, for example,<sup>21</sup> but as illustrated above, it is inadequate. Individual political aspirations have clearly played a very influential role during the course of Indo-Bangladesh relations.

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The conduct of the Farakka barrage dispute during Ershad's regime was also influenced by domestic pressures arising within Bangladesh. Analyst Ben Crow has brought to light little-known details concerning the politicised nature of the issue in a study which is balanced, thorough and based on a wide range of sources.<sup>22</sup> Crow's study includes what appears to be unique oral evidence concerning information and discussions on Farakka that were never put into writing. His research shows that the resolution of the Farakka dispute was hampered partly by features of Bangladeshi political life and partly by factionalism within the Bangladesh government, particularly during Ershad's regime.

Between 1983 and 1987, a conflict emerged in the Bangladesh government between hard-line conservatives and those who were attempting to implement initiatives to break the Farakka deadlock. Bangladesh Irrigation Ministers, Obaidullah Khan and Anisul Islam Mahmud, wanted to move away from the conservative, hard-fought line which insisted on Ganges augmentation

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18 See Chapters Three and Four.

19 See Chapter Eight.

20 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 8 June 1988.

21 See S.D. Muni, *Pangs of Proximity: India and Sri Lanka's Ethnic Crisis*, New Delhi, 1993, p. 28.

22 B. Crow (et al.), *Sharing the Ganges: The Politics and Technology of River Development*, New Delhi, 1995.

via storage reservoirs in Nepal. The old-line option required Indian co-operation, but this was not forthcoming because the scheme clashed with India's bilaterally-focused foreign policy. The new-liners therefore sought to devise water management systems which were internal to Bangladesh, and not dependent upon Indian acceptance. Both ministers pushed for a permanent sharing agreement for all rivers common to Bangladesh and India. Once a river sharing arrangement was established, new methods to augment the Gangetic flow within Bangladesh could be put in place, thereby circumventing the need to involve India in the long term. Such methods included a scheme not unlike India's link canal augmentation proposal.<sup>23</sup>

In 1986, the new-liners began to put together a scheme to augment the Ganges with water from the Brahmaputra via a link canal constructed entirely within Bangladesh and completely under Bangladesh's control<sup>24</sup> (see Figure 9, Chapter 3). The new-liners' efforts to gain wider support for this scheme brought the highly politicised and sensitive nature of the Farakka issue into sharp relief.

According to Crow's study, the internal link canal initiative represented a viable option for Bangladesh's water resource development, but failed to make headway because of anticipated popular rejection of the proposal. It was believed, by both the old and the new-line proponents, that the construction of any link canal, even one built entirely within Bangladesh, would be seen by the public as a pro-Indian, anti-Bangladeshi move, since it resembled the Indian augmentation scheme so closely.<sup>25</sup> Such sentiments were fuelled by the Indian government's own expression of support for the scheme because of the similarity to its own larger link canal proposal.<sup>26</sup> In an interview between Ben Crow and Obaidullah Khan, the latter commented that the Indian Irrigation Minister Mirdha was 'very responsive' concerning the internal canal, but the plan was regarded warily by Ershad and his military coterie because they believed that the plan would be 'more in India's interest than Bangladesh's'.<sup>27</sup>

The new-liners struggled with the difficult task of trying to gain support for a fresh and promising scheme within a highly controversial, politicised and

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23 See Chapter Three.

24 *The Economist* 'Bangladesh floods: drowned by politics', vol. 308, 17 September 1988, p. 38.

25 B. Crow (et al.), *op. cit.*, p. 193.

26 *ibid.*, p. 198.

27 *ibid.*

factionalised arena. The extreme political sensitivity of the internal link canal proposal, combined with the inherent fragility of the Bangladesh government itself, meant that those attempting to implement the initiative had to act with discretion, and garner as much political support from within government circles as possible. This was necessary in order to counter old-line arguments and, in turn, to gain the confidence of the ruling clique and the public. To push too vigorously for the proposal would have been political suicide, regardless of the scheme's practical advantages.<sup>28</sup> Because of the perceived need for secrecy, the proposal was the subject of much discussion behind closed doors for several years.<sup>29</sup>

As a result, new-line proponents felt compelled to maintain a dual course which consisted of an official, publicly-palatable position and an unofficial one, where controversial initiatives could be assessed and developed away from public scrutiny. Anisul Islam Mahmud cautiously admitted to the existence of this parallel structure in an interview with Ben Crow in 1987, but was unwilling to provide details, justifying his reticence thus: 'If you discuss it in public you start taking public positions which you then cannot change'.<sup>30</sup> In Crow's opinion, Mahmud was 'trying to ride two horses: to pave the way for the new line without appearing to reject the old'.<sup>31</sup> While deemed necessary, a dual tack created many difficulties for the new-line proponents, keeping their overall position weak and tenuous and providing ample scope for exploitation by their opponents.<sup>32</sup> The dual tactic also meant that none of the main initiatives of the new line could be put into writing. Inevitably, attempts to present those proposals verbally to the Indian government were vague and lacked credibility,<sup>33</sup> causing Indian interest in the initiatives to wane. Even Rajiv Gandhi's compromising overtures in 1985-6<sup>34</sup> were not sufficient to overcome the reservations held in conservative Indian and Bangladesh government circles towards the new-line initiatives. Rajiv's attempts to break the Farakka deadlock were stymied in a similar fashion to those of the new-liners in Bangladesh, as pointed out by a senior Indian water official to Ben Crow: 'To

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28 *ibid.*, p. 193.

29 *ibid.*

30 *ibid.*

31 *ibid.*

32 *ibid.*, p. 194.

33 *ibid.*, p. 198.

34 *ibid.*, p. 194-5.

some extent, the Prime Minister [Rajiv Gandhi] was in the position of Anisul Islam - he had not carried the Cabinet with him'.<sup>35</sup>

By early 1987, old-line proponents had strengthened their positions within both governments. The Farakka stalemate hardened correspondingly. The entire issue of water sharing was so politically loaded in Bangladesh that even viable and reasonable proposals put forward by Bangladeshis themselves foundered on the obstacle of entrenched domestic political behaviour. The *ad hoc* and personalised political structure which existed in Bangladesh, and the strength of easily provoked Bangladeshi fears and prejudices concerning India's intentions, reinforced the process of politicisation of the Farakka dispute and impeded its resolution.

Political impediments like these were not unique to Bangladesh. Analyst B. G. Verghese considered these sorts of political difficulties to be common to both Bangladesh and India, emphasising that such problems had to be addressed by both countries in order to break the Farakka stalemate:

An objective analysis would suggest that over the years both sides have taken certain inflexible positions and made extravagant proposals and inflated claims without adequate technical, socio-economic or ecological data or sufficient regard for the other's reasonable needs. They have got locked into their own past rhetoric or perceptions, viewing enormously complex and diverse sets of propositions and aspirations in simplistic terms. Limited vision has precluded any meaningful consideration of potential trade-offs. Mistrust has hardened and none has calculated the opportunity costs of delay. Basically and ultimately, the eastern waters question, which includes water sharing and augmenting the lean [flow] of the Ganga...is not just an engineering problem but a political question enveloping the long-term relationship between the co-riparians....The problem is by no means incapable of a solution that is just and fair to both sides.<sup>36</sup>

As has been argued in preceding chapters,<sup>37</sup> the Farakka stalemate has benefited India rather than Bangladesh, with the former having had a greater impact in perpetuating the stalemate. Nevertheless, as shown above, political pressures deriving from within Bangladesh have also played an influential part in protracting and aggravating the Farakka barrage dispute.

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The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Montagnard insurgency represents another example of the way in which Bangladesh's domestic problems have

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>36</sup> B.G. Verghese, *Waters of Hope: Integrated Water Resource Development and Regional Cooperation within the Himalayan-Ganga-Brahmaputra-Barak Basin*, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 374-5.

<sup>37</sup> See Chapters Two and Three.

affected diplomatic relations with India. CHT insurgency impinged increasingly on Indo-Bangladesh relations between 1976 and 1990. The Bangladesh government blamed India for exacerbating the ethnic conflict, which otherwise might have been resolved with less difficulty; while India saw the issue as yet another example of Indian vulnerability to neighbouring domestic strife.<sup>38</sup> The history of insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region has been described in more detail elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> The aim here is to illustrate the long-standing nature of CHT Montagnard unrest and to assess the extent to which Indo-Bangladesh tension has been exacerbated by or has contributed towards the escalating violence in the CHT.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts of southeast Bangladesh comprise 13,000 square kilometres (ten per cent of Bangladesh) which form a strategic border area next to India and Burma. The Hill Tracts are part of a rugged and rainforested mountain range extending 1,800 kilometres from western Burma to the eastern Himalayas in China (see Figure 10). The CHT region is inhabited by approximately a dozen non-Bengali, ethnically diverse Montagnard groups,<sup>40</sup> as well as a growing population of Bengali settlers. Estimates of population in the CHT vary from 500,000 to 650,000, with the largest group, the Chakmas, accounting for between 250,000 and 400,000.<sup>41</sup> The Bengali settler population figures are equally inconsistent, ranging between 300,000 and 470,000, or between fifty and sixty per cent of the total CHT population.<sup>42</sup>

38 For examples, see *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 18 April 1988 (Bangladesh viewpoint); and K.P. Khanal, 'Impact of Domestic Conflicts on Regional Cooperation in South Asia', in B. Sen Gupta, *Regional Cooperation and Development in South Asia, Vol. 2*, New Delhi, 1986 p. 195 (Indian viewpoint).

39 Useful sources dealing with the Chittagong Hill Tract tribal insurgency include: S.M. Ali, *The Fearful State: Power, People and Internal War in South Asia*, London, 1993, pp. 162-203; M. Rahman Shelley (ed.), *The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: The Untold Story*, Dhaka, 1992; U. Phadnis (et al.) (eds), *Domestic Conflicts in South Asia, Vol. 1: Political Dimensions*, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 55-83; W. Van Schendel, 'The Invention of the "Jummas": State Formation and Ethnicity in Southeastern Bangladesh', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, pp. 95-128; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Intractable hills: autonomy plan fails to appease the rebels', 5 April 1990, pp. 22-24; and S.S. Ahsan, & B. Chakma, 'Problems of National Integration in Bangladesh: The Chittagong Hill Tracts', *Asian Survey*, vol. XXIX, no. 10, October 1989, pp. 959-970.

40 The figure ranges from 11 to 13, depending on the source. See S.M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

41 The figures are based on a variety of sources: 1991 Census, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, cited in M. Rahman Shelley (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 50; S.M. Ali, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-7; W. Van Schendel, *op. cit.*, p. 95; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Intractable hills: autonomy plan fails to appease the rebels', 5 April 1990, p. 24.

42 W. Van Schendel, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

Many factors contributed to the emergence of militancy amongst the hill people of the CHT. Most could be categorised as gross exploitation and mismanagement by successive central governments: British, Pakistani and Bangladeshi. The Indian government contributed towards CHT militancy, but its role was minor when compared with the impact of long-term domestic pressures which were exerted upon the Montagnard groups.

Anthropologist Willem Van Schendel has produced pioneering work on state formation and ethnicity in the CHT, a subject which he considers to have been previously ignored, especially within Bangladesh, by anthropologists and historians.<sup>43</sup> According to Van Schendel, this neglect by scholars has resulted both in a lack of available information on the CHT, and in a 'remarkably stagnant view of the hill people' being held by many, particularly the Bengalis of Bangladesh.<sup>44</sup> Van Schendel has blamed the colonial era for this stereotyping process. Before colonial domination, the hill people were generally perceived as 'free agents', feared for their 'independence and military prowess' and regarded as 'invincible on their own turf'.<sup>45</sup> With colonialism, this perception changed to the common view that they were inferior, subordinate and dependent.<sup>46</sup> Van Schendel explains that nineteenth century descriptions of the hill people as 'primitives', 'savages', or 'wild hill tribes' are often found in contemporary writings in Bangladesh which have been dominated by the assumption that the hill people are "'isolated remnants" of some hoary past that have preserved their culture unchanged from time immemorial'. The Chittagong hill people have also been commonly regarded in Bangladesh as 'backward and childlike,...needing to be protected, educated, and disciplined by those who are more advanced-socially'.<sup>47</sup>

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43 *ibid.*, p.102.

44 *ibid.*

45 *ibid.*, p. 108.

46 *ibid.*, p. 102-4.

47 As an example, Van Schendel quotes Abdus Sattar, a prominent Bangladeshi writer on tribal affairs in the 1970s, who described the hill people thus: 'Their way of life is timeless. Their cultural configuration is still intact, the outlines still hard and sharply drawn against the contrasting background of civilization with no sign of dimming....If there is no education it will further widen the gap between the civilized and the pre-civilized. Isolated and left behind the tribes will become more inward-looking and aggressive....The tribals are usually simple, credulous and jovial folks. As long as they have enough to eat they are not much bothered by worries....They are of deep interest to any one who wants to discover man in his raw form.' Abdus Sattar, *Tribal Culture in Bangladesh*, Dacca, Muktaadhara, 1975. pp. 4-7, cited in W. Van Schendel, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-4.

Van Schendel has countered this stereotypical view of a primitive and static tribal culture with clear and concise evidence, emphasising the following: the variety of cultures which exist within the Chittagong hill people; the many and different ways in which the hill groups have continually adapted and modified cultural practices in response to various stimuli; the complex patterns of wide-ranging migration which the hill people have developed over the centuries; and the long history of trade networks developed by the hill people for the exchange of goods and ideas amongst not only themselves but also with the inhabitants of southeastern Bengal, Tripura, western Burma and perhaps further.<sup>48</sup>

Because the Chittagong hill people have been stereotyped as 'primitive tribals', as opposed to 'civilised Bengalis', it has meant that successive governments have been able to pursue authoritarian, militaristic and exploitative practices in the CHT, without fear of evoking widespread domestic condemnation. In fostering these stereotypical attitudes, colonial economic and political practices in the CHT created an increasingly antagonistic gulf between the Bengalis and the hill people. Such actions were carried out initially by the English East India Company in the eighteenth century. Monetisation and accompanying usurious money lending practices by plainlander Bengalis began to supplant the traditional subsistence and barter economy in the region.<sup>49</sup> Indebtedness and economic dependency amongst the hill people were the results.

The British Raj officially absorbed the CHT into the Empire in 1860, but administered the strategically-vital border region by military means, isolating the region from political reform occurring elsewhere, such as with the establishment of an increasingly representative provincial legislature.<sup>50</sup> Shifting cultivation was further discouraged because of the problems associated with administering and controlling a moving population. By 1890, about 3,000 hectares of scarce arable land were being cultivated, over half of which were being worked by the more experienced Bengali settlers.<sup>51</sup>

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48 W. Van Schendel, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-6.

49 S.M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

50 *ibid.*, p. 175.

51 *ibid.*, p. 171.

The CHT Regulation of 1900 restricted further Bengali migration into the area, essentially to isolate and consolidate the Empire's border regions.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, politicisation of the hill people was already well-underway and the notion of a separate political identity gathered momentum. In isolating the CHT, the Regulation of 1900 appeared to provide a form of autonomy to the hill peoples, or to protect their rights. Van Schendel has argued that the opposite was true, that the Regulation marked 'the onset of a process of "enclavement" in which the hill people were denied access to power and were subordinated and exploited directly by their British overlords'.<sup>53</sup> The isolationist policy restricted major aspects of hill people life: administration and decision making, migration and trade networks, and other economic activities intrinsic to hill culture.<sup>54</sup> The Regulation of 1900 therefore served to accelerate the politicisation of the CHT inhabitants.

After Partition, the rights of the hill people were further eroded as the Pakistan government continued the tradition of exploitation in the region. The isolationist policy towards the CHT was reversed but this was of little benefit for the hill people. Bengali plainlanders were again encouraged to move into the area, placing additional pressure on resources which were already suffering from the effects of inappropriate cultivation practices.<sup>55</sup> Although unreliable, population figures show that, when compared with the total number of indigenous inhabitants, the proportion of Bengali migrants living in the CHT increased greatly after Partition. At that time, the hill people were believed to have constituted between 89 and 98 per cent of the total CHT population.<sup>56</sup> By 1991, that figure dropped to approximately 52%, due to the decades of government-sponsored Bengali migration.<sup>57</sup> Figures in Table 3 are approximations, but they do clearly indicate that the proportion of Bengali migrants living in the CHT has been increasing since Partition

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52 For a thorough analysis of the Act of 1900 see M. Rahman Shelley (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 73-106.

53 W. Van Schendel, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

54 *ibid.*, p. 115.

55 *ibid.*, pp. 115-6.

56 Ahsan and Chakma put the figure at 98%. S.S. Ahsan, & B. Chakma, *op. cit.*, pp. 965-6. S.M. Ali puts the figure at approximately 89%. S.M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

57 W. Van Schendel, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

**Table 3. Population Growth in the Chittagong Hill Tracts  
(Montagnards and Bengali Migrants)**

	1950			1981			1991		
	Montagnard Pop.	Bengali Migrant Pop.	Total Pop.	Montagnard Pop.	Bengali Migrant Pop.	Total Pop.	Montagnard Pop.	Bengali Migrant Pop.	Total Pop.
	240,000	28,000	268,000	439,458	268,998	708,456	498,595	468,825	967,420
<b>% of Total Pop.</b>	89.6	10.4		62.1	37.9		51.6	48.4	

Sources: S.M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 167, and 1991 Census, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, cited in M. Rahman Shelley (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 50.

In reopening the area to migration, the Pakistan government's aim was mainly to ease growing overpopulation pressure in the east wing lowlands, ignoring the certainty that hill people grievances and unrest would be exacerbated, especially as the latter were already facing overpopulation and economic decline. The government's move was characteristic of its broader nation-building strategy which involved the suppression of self-determination demands from disgruntled sections of the populace, such as the east Bengalis. The once-semi-independent Montagnard groups of the CHT felt increasingly threatened, culturally, politically and economically, under the Pakistan, and subsequently, the Bangladesh governments. This resulted in violent clashes for arable land and in their own growing demand for autonomy.

One of the most devastating acts of government exploitation in the CHT, from the Montagnard perspective, was the building of the Kaptai hydro-electricity project between 1959 and 1963. The Kaptai dam, the so-called 'Lake of Tears' (see Figure 10), flooded 20,000 hectares of the CHT (one quarter of the best quality arable land in the area), displacing 96,000 Montagnards, mostly of the Chakma group. Compensation fell far short of what was promised, and even by 1980, only US\$2.6 million had been disbursed out of the original US\$51 million supposedly set aside for this purpose.<sup>58</sup> The project had numerous other adverse consequences for the hill people, effects which have been highlighted by many, such as S. Mahmud Ali, who considered that for the majority of tribals displaced by the project, 'life had been an 'unmitigated disaster since 1959.'<sup>59</sup> Ali also drew attention to a letter which was delivered in

<sup>58</sup> S.M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 179.

his presence to Ziaur Rahman in 1976 by a Chakma elder who expressed his sorrow over the disastrous impact of the dam on the hill people:

The vast expanse of water captured by the dam provides a scene that impresses every visitor with its beauty. But could anybody have thought that this immense body of water is to some extent filled with the tears of the local people? Through the cables of the electric lines not only current flows, but also the sighs of grief.<sup>60</sup>

The Kaptai project and its aftermath typified the way in which the hill people were exploited, neglected and alienated by successive governments.

A strong military tradition was also reinforced in the CHT by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) which undertook covert, anti-Communist operations in the area.<sup>61</sup> The late 1950s saw Dhaka as a 'centre of the CIA's struggle against Communism' and the CHT region became a command post for CIA operations against Chinese authority in Tibet.<sup>62</sup> Hill people militias were trained and armed by the CIA to help protect their operations. The CHT guerrillas were also covertly armed and trained by Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence organisation in order to 'pursue a low-risk, low-intensity proxy war' against India.<sup>63</sup> The sensitivity of operations in the CHT was heightened further with China's later involvement.<sup>64</sup> According to Ali, the CHT tribal military wing which eventually formed, known as the *Shanti Bahini*, 'drew its roots from that old tradition' of clandestine militarisation.<sup>65</sup>

Bangladesh's independence war of 1971 exacerbated Montagnard grievances, despite the fact that the war was a secessionist struggle against similar problems: political, economic and cultural domination.<sup>66</sup> After the war, conflict over land ownership and regional autonomy demands became acute between the Montagnards and the new government which tended to favour the Bengali settlers. As leader of the fledgling state, Mujibur Rahman ignored hill people sensitivities, attempting to repress and absorb ethnic identities for the

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60 *ibid.*

61 *ibid.*, pp. 181-2.

62 *ibid.* See also: Chris Mullin, 'The CIA Conspiracy', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, vol. 36, no. 89, 1975, pp. 149-150.

63 S.M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

64 *ibid.*

65 *ibid.*

66 The 1971 war resulted in divided loyalties within the tribal groups. Some supported the Mizo and Naga insurgents in India and hence sided with the Pakistan central government. Others joined the Bengali Liberation Army but were not trusted and became disillusioned. Many Montagnards who fled into India during the war found, on their return, that their land had been occupied by Bengali settlers. This resulted in armed conflict over land claims. For further information, see S.M. Ali, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-3.

sake of 'greater "Bengali" nationalism'.<sup>67</sup> Mujib roused considerable anger in the CHT in 1973 when he declared that all hill people would be known as Bengali, and not by any other identity.<sup>68</sup> M.N. Larma, one of the most prominent Chakma leaders at that time, and later a Member of Parliament, led a constitutional struggle against Mujib's strategy of cultural assimilation. Larma's argument was:

[Y]ou cannot impose your national identity on others. I am a Chakma, not a Bengali. I am a citizen of Bangladesh-Bangladeshi. You are also Bangladeshi but your national identity is Bengali....They (tribals) can never be Bengali.<sup>69</sup>

Following the 1975 coup which removed Mujib, Larma went underground, establishing the Montagnard armed wing, the *Shanti Bahini*. CHT unrest and militarisation evoked an often forceful and violent response from the government during both Zia's and Ershad's regimes. From 1976 onwards, the *Shanti Bahini* was involved in regular confrontations with government forces and armed CHT Bengali settlers, these clashes usually being followed by retribution massacres of Montagnard civilians by the military and the settlers.<sup>70</sup> The *Shanti Bahini* responded in kind, also killing many unarmed civilians.<sup>71</sup> According to a 1986 Amnesty International report, on no occasion did the Bangladesh government conduct an inquiry into the many complaints of 'unlawful and arbitrary killings of unarmed tribal people' in the CHT.<sup>72</sup>

Various patterns therefore emerged in the CHT, beginning over a century before Montagnard insurgency became associated with the declining warmth of Indo-Bangladesh relations from the mid-1970s. These patterns included:

<sup>67</sup> S.S. Ahsan, & B. Chakma, *op. cit.*, p. 967.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 968.

<sup>69</sup> 'Larma's Debate in the Parliament,' *Bangladesh National Assembly Debates*, 1:6, January 23, 1974, cited in S.S. Ahsan, & B. Chakma, *op. cit.*, p. 968.

<sup>70</sup> For example, according to an Anti-Slavery report (submitted to a UN human rights subcommission working group on indigenous peoples) about 300 unarmed tribal men, women and children were massacred by Bangladeshi troops and armed Bengali immigrants at the village of Kaokhali Bazar on 25 March 1980. Anti-Slavery Society, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Militarization, Oppression and the Hill Tribes*, Indigenous Peoples and Development Series, Report No. 2. London, Anti-Slavery Society, 1984, p. 55.

<sup>71</sup> For example, on 31 May 1984, members of the *Shanti Bahini* killed 175 settlers, including 33 women. *Asian Recorder*, 29 July-4 August 1984, p. 17861. See also *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Intractable hills: autonomy plan fails to appease the rebels', 5 April 1990, p. 23. According to an Amnesty International report, the Bangladesh government was responsible for many human rights abuses in the CHT including deliberate and unlawful political killings. The Bangladesh government categorically rejected these accusations. Amnesty International, *Bangladesh: Unlawful Killings and Torture in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*, London, 1986, pp. 10-11.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.

continual migration of Bengali plainlanders into the CHT, placing excessive pressure on arable land and other limited resources; political, economic and cultural exploitation of the indigenous inhabitants; a tradition of guerrilla warfare and military manoeuvres in the region; and increasing politicisation and militarisation of the Montagnards. Montagnard unrest intensified during Zia's and Ershad's regimes. The reasons for the unrest were so deep-seated that even well-meaning attempts at domestic reform had little remedial impact. The bitterness and intractability surrounding the issue virtually dictated that the Bangladesh government would focus on India's involvement in order to divert domestic criticism.

In October 1983, for example, Ershad changed tack in dealing with the CHT issue, switching from excessive force to appeasement. Further plainlander migration into the CHT was halted,<sup>73</sup> and in hoping to pacify and disarm the *Shanti Bahini*, Ershad declared a general amnesty 'for the misguided persons in the Chittagong Hill Tracts to bring them back to normal life for a happy reunion with their parents and families'.<sup>74</sup> Ershad's overture was supported by a six-point programme which offered *Shanti Bahini* members food, land, low-interest loans, jobs and training.<sup>75</sup> By the end of 1985, 2,500 out of an estimated 6,000 had surrendered, but these belonged mostly to a less militant faction of the *Shanti Bahini*.<sup>76</sup>

*Shanti Bahini* guerrilla operations, led by M.N. Larma's brother, Shantu, increased in ferocity, reaching a peak in May 1986.<sup>77</sup> Killings and reprisals by both the *Shanti Bahini* and the Bengali settlers, the latter backed by government forces,<sup>78</sup> caused many thousands of Chakmas to flee into the neighbouring Indian state of Tripura, bringing the conflict under the

<sup>73</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 23 March 1988.

<sup>74</sup> *Asian Recorder*, July 29-August 4, 1984, p. 17862.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> S.M. Ali, *op. cit.*, p.193. The figure for surrendered guerrillas varies. According to the *New York Times*, only 2,000 had surrendered by October 1986. *New York Times*, 23 October 1986.

<sup>77</sup> See *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, vol. XXXII, July 1986, p. 34483 and vol. XXXIII, December 1987, p. 35574.

<sup>78</sup> By June 1986, approximately 20,000 troops and armed police were placed on alert throughout southeast Bangladesh. According to the Madras paper, *The Hindu*, the Bangladeshi soldiers operating in the CHT were also being trained in counterinsurgency methods by the British Special Air Service (SAS). *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, vol. XXXII, July 1986, p. 34483.

international spotlight.<sup>79</sup> A subsequent offer of amnesty for the *Shanti Bahini* also had little success.

The refugee crisis in 1986 strained relations between Bangladesh and India, in part reflecting the general cooling of relations between the two states in 1986-7.<sup>80</sup> In an attempt to ease the refugee problem by encouraging the hill people to return to Bangladesh, the Bangladesh parliament passed four laws in 1989, supposedly aimed to grant a form of autonomy to the CHT. The autonomy scheme, seen by the hill people as a 'sop to international opinion', was so obviously flawed that it did little to ease CHT unrest.<sup>81</sup> The most glaring fault of the autonomy plan was that it had no authority over the reserved and protected forests: the Kaptai hydroelectric project area and the industrialised parts of the CHT, which together made up 90% of the region.<sup>82</sup> Hill people distrust and suspicion of government intentions had been generated over decades and were simply too entrenched to be swept away by hasty legislation. As pointed out by an exiled Chakma newspaper editor living in Tripura: 'If properly implemented, the autonomy granted the three district councils in the CHT is not bad. But the problem is that it is on paper only.'<sup>83</sup>

The CHT insurgency and violence therefore remained a constant source of domestic pressure on Ershad's regime.<sup>84</sup> Simplistic and authoritarian solutions exacerbated the issue and the media emphasis on Bengali settler massacres fostered considerable domestic anger in Bangladesh.<sup>85</sup> The

<sup>79</sup> *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, vol. XXXIII December 1987, p. 35574. India claimed that approximately 44,000 Chakma refugees were sheltering in five camps in Tripura, while Bangladesh put the figure at much less - about 30,000. See also *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 18 April 1988. According to a report by Amnesty International, the refugee crisis was sparked by the Bangladesh army carrying out 'thousands of arbitrary arrests' and killing and torturing 'innocent tribespeople at will.' *New York Times*, 23 October 1986.

<sup>80</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>81</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Intractable hills: autonomy plan fails to appease the rebels', 5 April 1990, p. 22.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>84</sup> For example in May 1988, BNP leader, Begum Khaleda Zia demanded the 'ouster of the present autocratic government' for, amongst other things, its 'failure to ensure security' of the people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. *Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 5 May 1988.

<sup>85</sup> The Bangladesh media habitually described the CHT violence in highly emotive terms, without exception placing blame on the *Shanti Bahini*. The following are a couple of examples of media descriptions: 'Their [the *Shanti Bahini*'s] heinous design is manifested in the orgy of repeated violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The latest brutal attack....resulting in the death of eleven persons was part of that heinous design'. *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 8 June 1987, and, 'The villagers found no words to narrate the cold blooded holocaust perpetrated by the Shanti Bahini', *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 3 May 1988.

deterioration in the CHT region in the second half of the 1980s, and Ershad's inability to bring the *Shanti Bahini* into line through either force or appeasement, meant that the 'foreign hand' ingredient was increasingly played upon. Ershad's regime was prepared to sour relations with India for the sake of countering adverse domestic opinion over the CHT dispute. The Bangladesh government's ineffective attempts to re-absorb and provide land for the thousands of Chakma refugees who had fled into India, not only in 1986, but at various times during the previous decade, prompted the following comment in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*:

...[I]t is an open question whether Dhaka will ever permit real autonomy [for the CHT] - even as defined in its own 1989 laws. And even if it did, the problems of how to re-absorb the refugees who have lost their land, and how to deal with the intractable issue of the Bengali settlers will still remain....Nowhere in Bangladesh can so many landless people be accommodated without severe domestic political repercussions. Dhaka evidently prefers to have problems with a few hundred thousand ethnic minority peoples in the hills - and to have strained relations with India - than to face the possible wrath of 114 million Bengalis in the plains.<sup>86</sup>

The Bangladesh government and media essentially sought to blame the *Shanti Bahini* as the initiator of all unrest and violence in the CHT and, in turn, to blame India for providing the insurgents with the means to continue their guerrilla activities. Propaganda and stereotypical imagery were used constantly by the Bangladesh government. The advantages of this approach were considerable. Placing blame on the *Shanti Bahini* and the Indian government deflected domestic criticism of the Bangladesh government's inability to resolve the CHT conflict; it also justified the arbitrary use of extreme force to suppress *Shanti Bahini* activities; and it made the CHT problem appear more manageable and straightforward if it could be explained in the narrow terms of a small minority group of terrorists intent on waging a war based on their own limited political agenda. The following comments by President Ershad represented typical examples of government propaganda:

...[I]f we review the whole situation in the hill districts, then we find that about 30,000 tribal population were forced into an exodus across the border through the creation of atrocities to serve [the] Shanti Bahini<sup>87</sup>...who have been operating from their sanctuary in the other land [India]....[T]hese Shanti Bahini men who have a Marxist mooring act at the instigation of 'others'. They are atheists and do not believe in the Allah, or the Buddha or the God or the Christ. They preach [a] godless cult which is contrary to the belief of [the] commonman belonging to the tribal and Bangalee...population....[F]rom the recovery

<sup>86</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Intractable hills: autonomy plan fails to appease the rebels', 5 April 1990, p. 24.

<sup>87</sup> This appears to be a distortion of events. The Chakma refugees had fled into India to escape the large-scale reprisal attacks by Bangladesh forces and armed Bengali settlers which occurred in response to a series of *Shanti Bahini* killings in the region. See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Intractable hills: autonomy plan fails to appease the rebels', 5 April 1990, p. 22.

of books and leaflets from the Shanti Bahini, it is explicit that they are Communists and promote the path of terrorism.<sup>88</sup>

'...[Shanti Bahini] atrocities were being let loose at times on innocent people which speaks of a conspiracy hatched outside against the people of the area'...'[T]he rest of the refugees...[want] to return to their homeland, but they are not being allowed to come back...[because of] intimidation...[by] vested quarters, including the Shanti Bahini, [who] are trying to prove that minorities are being subjected to harassment here'.<sup>89</sup>

Similar rhetoric was used by Bangladesh's foreign minister, Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury, who stated that *Shanti Bahini* attacks 'were not isolated incidents but part of a conspiracy,...the massacres...being carried out under a blue print drawn and assisted by an alien country' [India].<sup>90</sup>

The Bangladesh government attempted to add weight to its accusations by declaring that it had 'conclusive proof' that the *Shanti Bahini* were getting arms and sanctuary from India.<sup>91</sup> The accusations remained an integral aspect of the CHT issue, especially once it became clear that no substantial progress was being made in stemming violence in the region or in repatriating the thousands of Chakma refugees.<sup>92</sup> In June 1989, the *Bangladesh Observer* published a report appearing in the *New York Times* which stated that a senior Indian security officer had confirmed Indian assistance to the *Shanti Bahini*.<sup>93</sup> The officer was 'quoted as saying that his government was helping the "rebels" living in the camps of the para-military force of India along the border'.<sup>94</sup> The *New York Times* also stated that, according to Bimal Chakma, spokesperson for the *Shanti Bahini*, the Indian government had been giving 'arms and financial support' to his organisation since 1976, although he considered the degree of assistance to have been 'very low' compared with what was needed.<sup>95</sup> The *Far Eastern Economic Review* also concluded that some Indian assistance undoubtedly was provided to the *Shanti Bahini*:

The Bangladeshis frequently accuse India's intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), of providing sanctuary and training facilities to the Shanti

88 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 6 May 1988.

89 *ibid.* See also *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Playing the India Hand', 26 May 1988.

90 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 6 May 1988.

91 *New York Times*, 23 October 1986.

92 In June 1989, following further *Shanti Bahini* attacks, the *New York Times* put the refugee figure at 51,000, of which 9,000 were estimated to have fled to India in the preceding fortnight. *New York Times*, 11 June 1989.

93 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 14 June 1989

94 *ibid.*

95 *New York Times*, 11 June 1989. According to the *New York Times* article, *Shanti Bahini* weapons were also obtained from raids on Bangladeshi military units and by picking up large caches of Chinese semi-automatic weapons during the 1971 war.

Bahini. The charge is routinely denied by New Delhi, but it seems indisputable that the RAW maintains links with the rebels, though the extent is difficult to gauge.<sup>96</sup>

The Indian Government's official view of the Chittagong Hills conflict was to consider it to be an 'internal problem for Bangladesh',<sup>97</sup> a domestic ethnic dispute for which India had no responsibility. On a 3-day visit to Bangladesh in January 1987, Indian External Affairs Minister, Mr Narayan Tiwari, reiterated India's habitual response that no Indian assistance was being given to the *Shanti Bahini*. When asked whether or not the *Shanti Bahini* training camps in India would be dismantled, he jokingly replied: '[Y]ou are very clever to take a reply from me on camps which do not at all exist'.<sup>98</sup> In response to Bangladesh's accusations of Indian assistance to the *Shanti Bahini*, India not only denied involvement, but went so far as to accuse Bangladesh of the same type of activity: covertly aiding and harbouring Indian insurgents from Tripura, members of the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV).<sup>99</sup> Like India, the Bangladesh government vehemently denied providing insurgent assistance, pointing out that Bangladesh had 'neither the intention nor the means to train rebels from Tripura'.<sup>100</sup> The trading of accusations and the Chakma refugee problem placed additional stress on Indo-Bangladesh relations, further undermining the spirit of regional co-operation which accompanied the launching of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) in December 1985.

The Chittagong Hill Tract conflict has been heightened and manipulated by both the Bangladesh and Indian governments, according to political expediency. This has been carried out at the expense of the cultural, economic and political well-being of the Chittagong hill people themselves. The conflict has also reinforced the traditional fears and grievances between Bangladesh and India, such as Bangladeshi fears of Indian dominance, and disputes associated with the porous and ill-defined Indo-Bangladesh border.

At various times, according to political circumstances, the CHT issue has been down-played, over-played, stereotyped, mismanaged or ignored.

<sup>96</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Intractable hills: autonomy plan fails to appease the rebels', 5 April 1990, pp. 23-4.

<sup>97</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'In the Tribal Tangle', 20 August 1987, p. 21.

<sup>98</sup> *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 9 January 1987.

<sup>99</sup> See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'In the Tribal Tangle', 20 August 1987, pp. 21-22 and *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Talking with the Tribals', 1 September 1988, pp. 32-33.

<sup>100</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'In the Tribal Tangle', 20 August 1987, p. 22. See also 'Dhaka not training TNV guerillas', *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 30 January 1988.

Many thousands have died in the Chittagong Hill Tracts over the last two decades,<sup>101</sup> but the violence and acute ethnic divisions in the region have rarely received due international attention. This neglect was acknowledged in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*:

While political concern has centred around the Indo-Pakistan friction and the security threat generated by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the northeastern region of the Subcontinent, a potential powder keg, where South Asia meets Southeast Asia, has largely been ignored.<sup>102</sup>

It is noteworthy that the CHT conflict began to receive significant international attention after May 1986, when India's already unstable northeast was inundated with 50,000 Chakma refugees. Until then, the international media paid little attention to the dispute.

India, too, had taken a low-key official stance on the issue before the refugee crisis occurred. As long as the CHT ethnic conflict did not spiral out of control, the Indian government was able to reap certain benefits from Bangladesh's domestic strife. A Bangladeshi regime under domestic pressure was more easily manipulated than if it were in a secure, stable position. In the opinion of a Dhaka observer interviewed by the *Far Eastern Economic Review*:

For India, the actual ethnic conflict in the CHT is of secondary importance,...but the Shanti Bahini provides India with an important bargaining chip for other, more crucial issues - such as the Farakka barrage and the sharing of the waters of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra river complex.<sup>103</sup>

India's own insurgency problem in Tripura had also provided opportunities to use the *Shanti Bahini* 'bargaining chip' in discouraging Bangladeshi assistance to the TNV.

If the Indian government had so chosen, it could have exerted effective pressure on the *Shanti Bahini* insurgents to cease cross-border operations, but until the refugee crisis in 1986, there was no political advantage in doing so. Instead, at the very least, India covertly condoned the *Shanti Bahini* operations. Once the cost became too great, India began to reconsider the

<sup>101</sup> Between 1976 and 1986, 2-3,000 were estimated to have been killed, while a further 3,000 were estimated to have died due to poor health care in the Tripura refugee camps between 1986 and 1989. See *New York Times*, 23 October 1986 and *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 22 June 1989. Violence, including massacres, have continually occurred in the CHT to the present day. For a recent outbreak and attempts at mediation, see *Dhaka Bangladesh* (Internet Edition of Daily News), 25 September 1996, 29 January 1997, and 4 February 1997. <http://www.dhaka-bangladesh.com/index.html>

<sup>102</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'An ill wind in the East', 19 December 1985, p. 26.

<sup>103</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Intractable hills: autonomy plan fails to appease the rebels', 5 April 1990, p. 24.

strategy of giving the *Shanti Bahini* assistance. The 50-60,000 hill people in Tripura refugee camps placed considerable socio-economic pressure on India's northeast, costing the Indian government, according to a 1990 report, 80 million rupees (US \$4.7 million) per year.<sup>104</sup> In order to ensure that the refugees returned to Bangladesh, and remained there, the Indian government was well aware that *Shanti Bahini* activities would have to be curbed to some degree. The considerable reduction in numbers of the *Shanti Bahini* and their increasing lack of mobility in the second half of the 1980s pointed to India's declining assistance to the insurgents.<sup>105</sup>

In August 1988 the Indian government lifted its ban on the TNV, reducing the need to use the *Shanti Bahini* as leverage against Bangladesh. The breakthrough in resolving the nine-year-old dispute between the Indian government and the Tripura insurgents made Indian assistance to the *Shanti Bahini* much less politically profitable.<sup>106</sup> The cycle of mutual accusations of aiding and harbouring insurgents was therefore broken.

A change of central government in the 1989 Indian elections also eased tensions with Bangladesh over the *Shanti Bahini*. On a three-day good-will visit to Dhaka, India's External Affairs Minister, Inder Kumar Gujral, emphasised his government's willingness to improve relations with Bangladesh.<sup>107</sup> Unlike his predecessor, Gujral adopted a more conciliatory approach in talks with Bangladesh regarding the *Shanti Bahini*. Instead of simply denying India's assistance to the insurgents, and therefore disclaiming any Indian responsibility, he stressed that 'no miscreants would be given sanctuary in the Indian side'.<sup>108</sup> He also assured the Bangladesh government of India's 'whole-hearted co-operation' in 'facilitating the return of refugees to the Chittagong Hill Tracts'.<sup>109</sup> The conciliatory gestures were almost a repeat of those put forward by the previous non-Congress government, the Janata regime in 1977-9. Janata Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, also gave due acknowledgment to the insurgency issue, proffering assurances that India would not harbour tribal

104 *ibid.*, p. 23.

105 The number of *Shanti Bahini* had dropped to about 500 by 1990. *ibid.*

106 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 'Talking with the Tribals', 1 September 1988, p. 32.

107 *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dhaka), 19 February 1990.

108 *ibid.*

109 *ibid.*

insurgents.<sup>110</sup> His pledge was reciprocated by the Bangladesh President, Ziaur Rahman.<sup>111</sup>

As has been pointed out by many analysts, regional tension is partly a reflection of the domestic conditions prevailing within each of the states of the region.<sup>112</sup> There is little doubt that the Chittagong Hills conflict developed and intensified due to domestic causes and that the grievances of the hill people led, in turn, to increased tension between Bangladesh and India. The British Raj and the Pakistan government set the course for those grievances, and Mujib, Zia and Ershad compounded the depth of CHT unrest by forcefully implementing contradictory, insensitive and ill-conceived schemes, supposedly aimed to secure national integrity. As a fledgling state, Bangladesh's weak and underdeveloped political structure was characterised by inconsistencies in decision-making and by a preoccupation with promoting images of cultural homogeneity and national integration. Efforts to suppress expressions of CHT ethnicity, as undertaken by Mujib, were almost guaranteed to produce a violent backlash.

The relationship between the two seemingly contradictory objectives of national integration and ethnic fulfilment has been evaluated by anthropologist, Thomas Eriksen. His conclusion has been that if violent conflicts between the 'nation-state and ethnicity are to be avoided then the state must reduce its demands as regards the degree of cultural integration of its citizens'.<sup>113</sup> According to Eriksen, finding this equilibrium is an extremely difficult task since virtually any modern bureaucratic state will, almost by nature, 'promote cultural integration at any cost'.<sup>114</sup>

In a politically insecure state, such as Bangladesh, the difficulties associated with successful cultural integration are much more pronounced. Bangladesh's relative cultural homogeneity has often been contrasted with the ethnic diversity and tensions existing in Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka. Bangladesh's cultural unity has been emphasised and played upon by the state's successive leaders, almost in the hope that political unity and stability would automatically follow. As a result, for the small minority of non-Muslim

110 *The Asian Recorder*, May 28 - June 3, 1979, p. 14903, and *New York Times*, 19 April 1979.

111 *The Asian Recorder*, May 28 - June 3, 1979, p. 14903.

112 For example: K.P. Khanal, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

113 T.H. Eriksen, 'Ethnicity Versus Nationalism', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1991, p. 277.

114 *ibid.*

inhabitants,<sup>115</sup> and the much smaller minority of non-Bengali inhabitants, there has been little scope to express and retain their cultural identity in an accepted and positive manner. Instead, violent conflict and cultural division have tended to accompany minority demands for cultural and political recognition, as has occurred in the CHT. A susceptibility to factionalism and a lack of co-ordination amongst the hill people have also prevented the effective articulation of their ethnic claims.

Bangladesh's relative cultural homogeneity has kept violent ethnic divisions to a much smaller scale than in the other large South Asian states, but the depth of bitterness and the degree of intractability associated with conflicts such as the CHT insurgency, are comparable. Until the validity and complexity of the hill people grievances are adequately accommodated by the Bangladesh government, the tension in the region will continue to simmer and, at times, spill over into Indian territory.

The Chittagong Hills violence has a clear and deep-seated domestic origin, a causal link which has been emphasised by the Indian press and pro-India sources as evidence for the view that Bangladesh's domestic strife has been largely responsible for the difficulties which have marred Indo-Bangladesh relations.<sup>116</sup> In evaluating the evidence, there is much to counter this simple argument, indicating that India has had an intrinsic and active role in contributing towards the tension between the two states. The course of events associated with the Chittagong conflict shows that India played a subtle, but fundamental part in exacerbating the issue. The Indian government did not create the CHT unrest, nor did India prevent its resolution. India has, however, used the issue to its political advantage wherever possible, hindering rather than assisting the Bangladesh government in dealing with the problem. Tensions in the CHT were so easily exacerbated that it took very little effort, or risk, on India's part to exploit the issue.

The changes of Indian government in 1977 and in 1989 showed clearly that India had the power to turn the CHT violence into either a major or minor source of antagonism between the two states. Other Indian domestic political fluctuations, such as the extent of insurgent activity in Tripura, were also

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<sup>115</sup> According to the 1991 Census, approximately 15% of Bangladesh's population was non-Muslim. *Statesman's Year-book 1993-1994*, London, 1993, p. 190.

<sup>116</sup> For examples, see: *Times of India*, 17 July 1987; K. P. Khanal, *op. cit.*, p. 192 and Nancy Jetly, 'India and the Domestic Turmoil in South Asia', in U. Phadnis (et al.) (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73.

reflected in India's reactions to CHT unrest. To some extent, a degree of tension between India and Bangladesh over the CHT conflict was not undesirable from the point of view of both governments. As long as the conflict was manageable, it served the purpose of allowing each to use the other as a scapegoat to assuage domestic condemnation.

The events and issues above illustrate the way in which domestic pressures occurring within Bangladesh have affected the course of relations with India. Those stimuli have sometimes, almost coincidentally, helped to improve ties, but more often than not, they have had an adverse impact on cooperative relations. Problems arising from Bangladesh's colonial past and the state's subsequent political underdevelopment, insecurity and factionalism have been compounded by increasing socio-cultural pressures, such as severe and worsening poverty<sup>117</sup> and intensified expressions of ethnic identity. The manner in which the Bangladesh government has responded to these pressures has not helped to promote harmonious relations with India.

Isolating some of the domestic forces shaping Bangladesh's relations with India illustrates the intricacy of the relationship between the two states. Bangladesh's ever-present domestic turmoil provides an easy target for those wanting to understand why the problems between the two states have proved so difficult to resolve. The above analysis illustrates the inadequacy of such a narrow perspective. While some domestic pressures have clearly marred or improved Bangladesh's relations with India, others, such as the Chittagong insurgency, show that India's role has been far more pervasive than might appear initially. India's impassivity and subtle forms of hindrance have had a compelling, if not formidable, impact on the tenor of relations with Bangladesh, even concerning those issues over which the Bangladesh government has had considerable influence.

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117 See Chapter One.

**Figure 10: Chittagong Hill Tracts**

Source: Anti-Slavery Society, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Militarization, Oppression and the Hill Tribes*, Indigenous Peoples and Development Series, Report No. 2, London, Anti-Slavery Society, 1984, p. 10.

