

Women living under muslim laws
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

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Move towards state sponsored Islamisation in Bangladesh

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On 7th June 1988, the members of the controversially elected parliament of Bangladesh passed the Constitution (8th Amendment) Bill imposing Islam as the state religion of the country which broke away from another religious-based country - Pakistan - only 17 years ago. The four pillars of the Constitution of Bangladesh originally were nationalism, democracy, secularism and socialism. Secularism and socialism were dropped from the Constitution in 1977 to be replaced by 'total faith in Allah' and 'social justice'. By having Islam as the state religion, the nation-state which was created through a war of independence fought by Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians against communalism and religious fanaticism thus lost its original identity.

The main reason for declaring Islam the state religion has been said to be because of the statistical fact that there is an overwhelming majority of Muslims, and without Islam as the state religion the majority of the population was not able to establish its identity of nationhood, independence and sovereignty. It has also been said by government leaders that the move has been initiated with a view to curbing the alarming growth of fundamentalism, with particular reference to the politics of Jamat-e-Islami which is a strong opposition party notable for its religious fanaticism. But, encouraged by the passing of the Bill, the anti-Bangladesh Islam-loving fundamentalist groups have quickly come out of their shells and have called for the declaration of Bangladesh as an Islamic Republic to complete their rehabilitation. In one of his public speeches right after passing the Bill, the President has very clearly declared that no law that is repugnant to the principles of the Qur'an and Hadiths shall be effective any further in Bangladesh.

The government leaders insist that Islam is in danger in the hands of both the fundamentalists and the socialists, and hence it has to be saved. But in fact, Islam as the religion and creed of the majority has always been in a place of natural prominence and dominance in Bangladesh. Even in its secular days, Islam has been the dominant religion in state functions. Today every state function is preceded by recitations from the Qur'an. Bangladesh television broadcasts Azan regularly and other Islamic rituals are also performed by government ministers and functionaries as public duties. Women announcers and newsreaders are made to cover their heads during the month of Ramadan while performing. The President himself performs Haj every year using public funds as part of his state duties.

Even the first elected President of secular Bangladesh had on several occasions to insist that Bangladesh's secularism was not Godless atheism. It was he who had entered Bangladesh in the Organisation of Islamic Countries at its summit in 1973. His going to Rabat shows the strength of Islamic sentiment prevailing in newborn Bangladesh. The rajakars and albadars, the religious fanatic groups and killers of the Bengali intellectuals, students and freedom fighters were set free without trial by him. These facts establish the fact that Islam was never in danger in Bangladesh, and that pro-Islamic sentiment never disappeared from the country to give way to secularism. The capitalist-imperialist forces which were defeated in the liberation war did not lose any time in reaping material benefits from the situation. By eliminating the pro-socialist and secular faction of

the then ruling party - Awami League - they began the process of recapturing Bangladesh.

Bangladesh was liberated from Pakistan after 24 years of colonial relationship at a point of extreme violence on the part of the Pakistani military rulers and the religion traders. But even after liberation, secularism was not allowed to grow and take root in this country. The Islamisation process that had begun immediately after liberation was first given credibility by the post-1975 rulers as steps to regain national identity which they alleged was lost in secularism and socialism. They did not even anticipate any protest from the people of Bangladesh when dropping these two pillars from the Constitution in 1977. It is interesting to note that in Bangladesh the pro-socialist government had to fall within four years to moderate-right military forces which lasted for about seven years, only to fall to extreme-right military rulers who have managed to stay in power for seven years with very faint indications of leaving soon. But this government had to face the severest opposition from the people of the country. Apparently this has been the most unpopular government, which has plunged Bangladesh into a chronic condition of total political instability, economic crisis, unprecedented lawlessness, corruption, violence, frustration, hopelessness and drug addiction in the youth and no sense of direction for the future. In Bangladesh, the present government is faced with a situation which it is not able to control. The opposition parties which are essentially bourgeois in character have also failed so far in making any move that is even to their advantage. Very clearly, people have shown no confidence both in the ruling government and also in the system of bourgeois politics.

From the above it may be said that the main reasons for the continued crisis in Bangladesh are a) inability on the part of the government to solve the problems of the people and b) the absence of a political force able to replace or topple the present regime in a fruitful way.

In the rural areas the process of pauperisation is pushing more and more people below the poverty line. With practically no education, medical care, security and above all food, their situation is going out of control of the government. The concessional treatment of World Bank prescribed land reforms and rural credit programmes is not able to help much. Due to its capitalist-patriarchal nature, women in all sectors are being pushed back despite the rhetoric of women's development being supported and sponsored by the government. But many of the women who had to come out to work after 1972 as the male earners in their families were killed during the war feel quite strongly about their rights in society. There are other women's groups working for women's liberation and for obvious reasons would not like to give in to this pressure. The international women's movement and the United Nations' support for women's demands have widened the scope for educated women to increase their organisational and bargaining power. The present capitalist-military-patriarchal government apprehends serious opposition from the women's groups and definitely senses a 'silent anger' in the masses. Therefore religion has to be invoked in the interest of their own survival and preservation of dominance. The following summary of the nature of capitalist development in Bangladesh will make the picture clearer.

When Pakistan was created in 1947 there was no organised Bengali Muslim bourgeoisie in the country. The then Pakistani government encouraged the development of a free capitalist economy and the economy of the then East Pakistan was brought under the total control of the West wing. In the sixties, mainly for political reasons, they took the initiative to create a Bengali bourgeoisie in East Pakistan. As a result a number of rich families were born. Their role in the nationalist movements was always oscillating. During the liberation war in 1971, most of them naturally took the role of silent spectators, many even co-operated with the Pakistani military junta.

Right after liberation, the development of this Bengali rich class was thwarted, mainly due to nationalism in the field of trade and industry. Some of the influential members of the then ruling party - the Awami League - never approved of secularism or socialism and, in collaboration with national and international capitalist forces, succeeded in weakening the pro-socialist elements in the party and set the Bangladesh economy to develop along capitalist lines. A group of people inside and outside the party was allowed to thrive through plunder and exploitation. Gradually this particular group took control of the country's economy as well as politics. Upstarts and plunderers may be anything but patriots. And that is why it became so much easier for the capitalist-imperialist forces and their local agents to control and direct the situation to their

advantage.

After the change over in 1975 these were the people who came into power. They were open supporters of a free economy and immediately after coming to power they started to denationalise all the nationalised industries. Later on, along with changes in politics from time to time, this process has only been intensified and expedited. The public sector was curtailed in order to foster the private sector. The effort to establish a free economy in the country still continues.

Because of the distinctive historical background of capitalist development in the country and also due to a very weak position in the world capitalist system, the development of capitalism in Bangladesh possesses a very special character. The features of its character may be described as follows:

- a) The state performs a direct and principle role in fostering the development of a group of specially favoured capitalists.
- b) Imperialism plays a very significant role in this process through the state and through other agents such as multinationals, NGOs etc.
- c) The process of capitalist development in this country is not similar to that of the classical Western development of capital.

By its very nature of being dependent on imperialism and the state, this type of capitalism does not bring any effective change in the existing system. Therefore, Bangladesh is only creating a handful of new rich. On the other hand, because of continued despotic rule in Bangladesh, we experience formation of a military-civil-bureaucratic capital. The imperialist forces, the new big rich class and the military-civil-bureaucratic capital form a close relationship with each other and act as complementary forces for their own development. (M.M Akash 44)

In fact, this is a unified process. The profit that is extorted by this exploiting class by direct or indirect imperialist assistance, state co-operation, exploitation of the people, hoarding, black marketeering, speculation, indenting and other business and trades, is not being invested in any productive sector. Some of it is being reinvested, mainly in unproductive sectors, and some in welfare activities. Most of the profit is smuggled out of the country and spent in luxurious consumption. In fact, parasitism is an essential characteristic of bureaucratic state capitalism. And the state here gradually comes under the direct control of those new monied classes who are by nature agents of imperialist interests. As a result, Bangladesh has become totally bankrupt and 90% of its budget must come from foreign aid.

This special trend of capitalist development in Bangladesh has intensified the crisis of the people. It has also strengthened neo-colonial exploitation and has contained the pre-capitalist production relation from passing on to another stage. This in effect has created dissatisfaction in the minds of that faction of the bourgeoisie who are interested in productive investment.

The patriarchal-capitalist nature of the state continually pushes women of all classes to stand back and protest. Women are continually being pushed out of work and employment in the rural sector. In the urban areas in the name of culture and tradition, women are being discouraged from taking up jobs that are supposed to be meant for males. The state is not taking any responsibility for looking after children's development in any field. Rather, mothers are vigorously urged to give society worthy citizens and the technique suggested for that is strict birth control practices. More and more women are expressing their resentment at the existing system and women's movement workers are very clearly demanding a more egalitarian social structure. All these dynamics working together are pushing Bangladesh towards even greater disaster or social revolution.

Now this intensification of social conflict within the country has to be diverted as far as possible into a channel which is innocuous from the point of the view of the vested interest groups. The stirring up of antagonism along communal, chauvinistic (favouring one religion over another and

doing it through the state) lines is a convenient method of directing attention away from the genuine problems, from class struggle and women's struggle for an egalitarian social structure. The present government of Bangladesh has very cleverly held the line of Islamisation for its own survival. Introduction and implementation of Islamic laws will extend the power of the state to interfere with people's personal life and hence exercise more control over them. The family laws of Bangladesh will have sacrificed the 1961 Ordinance which brought at least some equality to women in marriage, divorce and in restricting polygamy. The facilities provided to women through the family courts will be taken away.

This perfectly suits the imperialistic and neo-colonial designs of the capitalist system. After the liberation of Bangladesh along secular and socialist lines and due to the Russian presence in Afghanistan, the American imperialist bloc maintained their links with this continent mainly through Pakistan via Saudi Arabia. After the changeover in 1975, they started channelling their aid and assistance of Bangladesh through Saudi Arabia and encouraged growth and strengthening of pro-Islamic feeling in order to regain and renew their influence in this territory. Fundamentalism seems on the surface a national phenomenon, but in fact it is very much related to imperialism and neo-colonialism. Most of the people of Bangladesh feel that this country has a long cultural tradition of peaceful living together of people of different religions and that glorification of one's own religion against the others' only upsets the harmony. Islamisation of Bangladesh has been criticised as the government's way of using fundamentalism to suppress all progressive political movements. Fundamentalism has the power to glorify the past, to mystify the present, so that people forget to look for a future.

However, it appears that the government has received more wrath than praise from the people by declaring Islam as the state religion. Had it been the long cherished hope of the majority they would have expressed it by welcoming the step. On the contrary: the leading students groups, progressive intellectuals, teachers, painters, doctors, lawyers, theatre artists and many other groups registered their protest immediately after the passing of the Bill. Women's groups have very strongly expressed their feelings against the Bill by organising processions, meetings and rallies and also by regular protests in newspapers and journals. United Women's Forum and Naripokkho organised protest rallies on the day the Bill was proposed. Naripokkho has also brought a writ petition challenging the Bill, but for obvious reasons the hearing is being delayed.

The most important thing is that people have expressed their dissatisfaction with the Bill and have repeatedly pledged to resist it.

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