



Pakistan and Bangladesh – Rising Discord

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The Government of Bangladesh, after four decades of attaining independence, started the war tribunal in 2010 convicting the war criminals of 1971, who were accused of committing heinous crimes including genocide during the freedom movement of Bangladesh and, later, had been either part of the government or occupied political or economically influential positions in Bangladesh. It has perturbed the Pakistani leadership, especially when members found guilty by the tribunal mostly belonged to the Bangladeshi Jamaat-e-Islami and Bangladesh Nationalist Party, who have been closer to the Pakistani government. But the relations between the two nations worsened significantly after the execution of Bangladesh Nationalist Party's leader Salauddin Quader Chowdhury and Jamaat-e-Islami's leader Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid in November 2015.

Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, the first member of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), was found guilty of nine out of 23 charges,¹ and was convicted of crimes which involved genocide, abduction, committing atrocities against Hindus and forcefully converting a number of Hindus to Islam.² The prosecution said that his father's residence in Chittagong was turned into a torture cell during the war.³

Mujahid, 67, was sentenced for war crimes including killing top intellectuals. Jamaat's official number two, he was convicted of heading the al-Badr armed group during the war.⁴ Despite having long been accused of leading massacres of pro-independence

figures and minorities, both Chowdhury and Mujahid held cabinet posts for a little over a decade ago when the BNP was in power.⁵ Mujahid was famous for his organisational skills and oratory. He was the Social Welfare Minister in the BNP-led government from 2001-2006. A student leader in 1971, he was among those, who supported Bangladesh remaining a part of Pakistan. Like many other Jamaat leaders, he went into hiding soon after independence, but resurfaced after Gen Ziaur Rahman came to power in a military coup in 1977. The tribunal found him guilty of five charges, including abduction and murder.⁶

The Pakistani Foreign Office came out with a strong response expressing its “deep concern and anguish” over the executions carried out in Bangladesh, stating that the trials were flawed. It also stated that Bangladesh is going against the terms laid out in the agreement of 1974 ratified between Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.⁷ In response, the High Commissioner of Pakistan to Bangladesh, Shuja Alam, was summoned by the then acting Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Mizanur Rahman, who handed over a note verbale to him. The note stated that by openly taking the side of those convicted of crimes against humanity and genocide, Pakistan has once again acknowledged its direct involvement and complicity with the mass atrocities and crimes committed during Bangladesh’s Liberation War in 1971. It further stated that the comments by the Pakistani Foreign Office were nothing less than brazen interference in the internal affairs of Bangladesh, which was unacceptable. It also stated that Pakistan should not make biased, borrowed and unfounded comments about the independent judiciary of a sovereign country, as Pakistan had accused the tribunal to be ‘flawed’. It made it clear that Bangladesh had full authority to put war criminals to trial, which does not go against the 1974 agreement.⁸

This was followed by Pakistan’s response when the Pakistani Foreign Office officially informed the Acting High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Pakistan that it denied all the allegations made by the Bangladeshi government. The Pakistani government made it clear that the 1974 tripartite agreement is the bedrock of relations between the two countries. As regards Bangladesh government’s contention that Pakistan presents a misleading interpretation of the agreement of 1974, Pakistan emphasised that, as part of the agreement, the Government of Bangladesh had then “decided not to proceed with the trials as an act of clemency.”⁹

This response triggered the expulsion of each other's diplomats on concocted charges. During December 2015, a Bangladeshi diplomat in Pakistan was expelled due to what Dhaka officials called "an act of retaliation" after a Pakistani diplomat in Dhaka was expelled after being accused of spying.¹⁰

In late December, Pakistan withdrew Farina Arshad, a diplomat at its High Commission in Dhaka, after Bangladeshi authorities accused her of spying and involvement in financing Islamist organizations. Pakistan said that Arshad had been withdrawn after "constantly being harassed by the Bangladeshi authorities," and it had twice summoned Bangladesh's High Commissioner to lodge protests on the issue.¹¹

Now, the discord between the two countries has turned more dramatic when each other's diplomatic personnel went missing in Islamabad and Dhaka in the first week of February. Bangladesh Foreign Ministry officials said that the personal officer of a Bangladeshi diplomat in Islamabad went missing and returned home "unhurt". Such an incident occurred when Dhaka police detained Abrar Ahmed Khan, an official of Pakistan High Commission for his "suspicious movement", releasing him to the officials of the Pakistani High Commission after taking an undertaking from him.¹² It was mentioned in the Bangladeshi media that the official was released only when his colleague was detained as a guarantor. Abrar Ahmed Khan could not show his identity card and driving license to the detectives when he was detained nor could he clarify as to why he was not using the number-plate prescribed for the diplomats on his motorbike.¹³

However, in a press release by the Pakistani High Commission in Dhaka, it was stated that men wearing jackets having the "DB"¹⁴ mark detained Abrar Khan in a moving van for more than four hours, constantly asking him to pay Taka five crore or else they would implicate him for the possessing Indian fake currency. He was also threatened that he would be killed in "crossfire" and "dumped" in the river.¹⁵

It was mentioned in a Bangladesh local vernacular daily that the Pakistani High Commissioner, Shuja Alam requested the acting Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Rear Admiral (Retd.) Md Khurshid Alam to release Abrar at the earliest, which was positively responded to by the Secretary. However, immediately after the release, the statement

released by the Pakistani High Commission was questioned by the Bangladeshi Foreign Office.¹⁶

Immediately after Abrar's release, Pakistani law enforcement detained one Bangladeshi official, Jahangir Hossain of the Press Council of the Bangladesh High Commission in Islamabad, detaining him for some hours to ascertain his identity, which was considered by Bangladesh to be a retaliatory step by the Pakistani government.¹⁷

A question was put up at the Bangladesh Parliament enquiring about breaking up of diplomatic relations with Pakistan, which was replied by Bangladeshi Foreign Minister, AH Mahmood Ali, "Problems do not necessarily mean we have to break relations. Many countries maintain diplomatic ties even during times of war... I don't want to do anything for now. The future will tell where this will go. We'll have to consider the time. We have to think of our national interest on top of everything... That's what we take into consideration when evaluating and taking steps relating to international relations. The same procedure will be followed in Pakistan's case."¹⁸

But Mahmood Ali also stated that Bangladesh is contemplating if it will participate in the forthcoming SAARC summit that is scheduled to be held in Islamabad in the month of September. There is also uncertainty over the proposed Foreign Secretary level meeting in Dhaka. It has been witnessed that the leaderships have abstained from attending conferences and summits that are being held either in Pakistan or in Bangladesh. Pakistan's Provincial Speaker and Senior Minister recently skipped attending several meetings held in Dhaka. Pakistan did not send any representative to the South Asian Speakers' Summit, which was held in Bangladesh. Pakistani Minister Zahid Hamid did not participate in an international sanitation summit in Dhaka. A diplomatic source in Dhaka said that he could not participate due to visa problems.¹⁹

Presently, it has been reported in the Bangladeshi media that some Pakistani historians are trying to distort facts by tactfully undermining the number of freedom fighters that were killed by the Pakistani Army during Bangladesh Freedom Movement of 1971. Bangladeshi media has criticized the voluminous book "1971: Facts and Fiction"

written by Miab Afrasiab last year, which tried to underplay the 1971 genocide as more of a fiction.²⁰

In respect to the rising domestic and strategic challenges that both Pakistan and Bangladesh face internally, continuing rise of tensions between the two that is swiftly moving towards breaking diplomatic ties between the nations, would be extremely detrimental not only for Bangladesh and Pakistan, but for the entire South Asian region. There is a need to dissipate misunderstandings and mutual mistrust for strengthening relations between nations, which can be the only element in facing the larger challenges in the spectrum.

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End Notes

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³ "Bangladesh War Crimes Trial: Key Accused," *BBC*, November 21, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-20970123>.

⁴ "Bangladesh Hangs Opposition Figures for War Crimes," *Al Jazeera*, November 22, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/bangladesh-executes-opposition-leaders-151121145034814.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Bangladesh War Crimes Trial: Key Accused," *BBC*, November 21, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-20970123>

⁷ Remarks by the spokesperson on the execution of Bangladesh nationalist Party leader, Mr. Salauddin Quadir Chowdhury and Mr Ali Ahsan Mojaheed, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, November 22, 2015, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=MzI3MA>.

⁸ Bangladesh conveys strong protest against the remarks of the spokesperson of Pakistan Foreign Ministry, Press Release, November 24, 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, <http://www.mofa.gov.bd/media/bangladesh-conveys-strong-protest-against-remarks-spokesperson-pakistan-foreign-ministry>.

⁹ Bangladesh Acting High Commissioner Summoned to Foreign Office, November 30, 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=MzI5MQ>.

¹⁰ "Bangladesh Summons Pakistani Diplomat to Lodge Protest in Worsening Row," *The Express Tribune*, February 3, 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1039311/bangladesh-summons-pakistani-diplomat-to-lodge-protest-in-worsening-row/>.

¹¹ Baseless Charges against a Pakistani Diplomat in Bangladesh, Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, December 24, 2015, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=MzM1Mg>; "Pakistan Expels Bangladeshi Diplomat amid Worsening 'Spy' Row," *Reuters*, January 07, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-pakistan-diplomacy-idUSKBN0UL0Z120160107>.

¹² "Bangladesh, Pakistan Briefly Detain Each Other's Embassy Staff," *The Economic Times*, February 02, 2016, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/bangladesh-pakistan-briefly-detain-each-others-embassy-staff/articleshow/50821069.cms>.

¹³ Raheed Ejaz, "Bitterness with Pakistan Growing," *Prothom Alo*, February 3, 2016, <http://en.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/news/93979/Bitterness-with-Pakistan-growing>.

¹⁴ Acronym of the "Detective Branch" of Bangladeshi Law Enforcement.

¹⁵ "The Pakistan High Commission Strongly Condemns This Incident and Rejects False and Fabricated Charges Levelled against its official," High Commission of Pakistan, Dhaka, Bangladesh, February 01, 2016, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/bangladesh/pr-details.php?prID=3436>

¹⁶ Raheed Ejaz, "পাকিস্তানের সঙ্গে তিক্ততা বাড়ছেই," *প্রথম আলো বাংলাদেশ*, February 3, 2016, <http://www.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/article/758743/পাকিস্তানের-সঙ্গে-তিক্ততা-বাড়ছেই>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Bangladesh to Keep Ties with Pakistan 'for Now', Says Foreign Minister," *Bangladesh News 24*, February 2, 2016, <http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/02/02/bangladesh-to-keep-ties-with-pakistan-for-now-says-foreign-minister>.

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