

LAWRENCE ZIRING, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad. An Interpretive Study.* Karachi et al.: Oxford University Press, 1992. X, 228 pages. ISBN 0-19-577420-5

This book is a useful addition to the somewhat scant literature on the political development of Bangladesh. While the events leading to the break-up of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state have been amply covered in monographs and articles there is still a dearth of comprehensive and analytical writing on the chequered history of the newly founded state, partly, no doubt, because so much of this history is shrouded in conspiratorial secrecy and mystery, with many coups and countercoups and the assassination of two presidents still unexplained – a cloak and dagger history. The author has personal knowledge of the country, having taught at Dhaka University in Pakistan times as well as in 1986 and having benefitted from contacts with contemporary witnesses. He is therefore in a good position to offer an informed and balanced version of the historical drama.

Going by the book's title one may be a little disappointed to find that a large part – roughly one third – of the volume is once more concerned with the pre-history of Bangladesh, with the often told story of the growth of Bengali autonomism, the emergence of the Awami League and the attempts of Pakistan's military rulers to contain the rebellious movement. We are taken from the roots of reformist Muslim movements in 18th and 19th century Bengal to the partition of Bengal in British times and the shock produced by its revocation in 1912, the ensuing growth of the Muslim League and Fazlul Huq's Krishak Proja Party, to the founding of the Awami League in 1949 as an opposition to the Muslim League, and to its ascendancy, following the 1954 provincial elections, to government role. Somewhat in premonition of future events the author finds a complete failure of the Awami League in its governmental performance. The parliamentary debacle of 1958 is largely attributed to the Awami League's machinations and the Mirza-Ayub Khan take-over in 1958 is explained in this perspective, as in the official version. Martial Law and Ayub Khan's rule are then summarily covered, with main emphasis on events in East Pakistan, the emergence of the 6-point programme, Mujibur Rahman's imprisonment and criminal prosecution and the mass movement leading to Ayub's downfall in 1969.

All this is interesting in many details and may also be intended to give information on the cultural background and the formative years of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, founder of Bangladesh. The author's tendency is to equate the Awami League's policies even in the earlier years with the personal attitude of Mujib, irrespective of the role of other politicians or the leadership of H.S. Suhrawardy. The minute description of the political parties' manoeuvring in the years after 1954 seems motivated mainly by an inclination to picture Mujib as an unscrupulous party tactician without the qualities of a statesman (p. 42). In consequence there is a certain underrating of the momentous turn of events in 1966: when Mujib, for the first time in an independent role, as freshly elected president of the Awami League adopted the 6-point formula and stood by it subsequently in negotiations with West Pakistan political leaders as well as in the face of Government persecution. This clear and steadfast resoluteness would seem to present him in a different light from the

author's negative characterization as the wily intriguer and demagogue devoid of a national vision (p. 42, 79).

The second period of martial law and Yahya Khan's constitutional measures are discussed more extensively and events leading up to the confrontation in 1971, the army crack down and civil war are told at some length. There is interesting new information on a constitutional compromise agreed upon by leading functionaries of the Awami League and PPP during the Dhaka negotiations in March 1969 – an agreement repudiated, however, by Bhutto (p. 68). In general Bhutto's fatal role is clearly brought out without, however, reflecting on the obvious collusion between Bhutto and Yahya. Somewhat surprisingly the author finally seems to adopt the Government's White Paper version of an impending attack by the Awami League allegedly prompting the army action (p. 69).

The main theme of the book is reached with the following chapters. They present the first three periods of Bangladesh history determined by three succeeding rulers: Mujibur Rahman, Ziaur Rahman and Ershad. Each one of these periods ended with a breakdown of the governmental system though each time with a characteristic difference. The reign of Mujibur Rahman appears as one tragic and all but inevitable failure culminating in the abandonment of his democratic ideals and establishment of one party dictatorship within three years of the triumphant return to his liberated country. This abrupt political reversal by Mujib's "Second Revolution" is seen as a defensive step in a situation where decay of governmental authority, erosion of party discipline in the Awami League and resort to violence in all political camps had led to a state of virtual civil war. The author's analysis is that in this situation of political fragmentation the only force able to effect a fundamental change was the army, through an intervention Pakistan style. He accordingly interprets the conspiracy against Sheikh Mujib and his assassination as a manoeuvre directed from high quarters: the majors who perpetrated the murder had no plans to assume power themselves; Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed, who is often suspected of being the mastermind behind the conspiracy, may in the author's opinion have been used rather as a cover to shield higher echelons in the conspiracy. The analysis clearly points to the leading role of Ziaur Rahman who "sanctioned the action that destroyed Mujib" and "was also its immediate beneficiary" (p. 136).

In spite of its sinister origins Zia's rule is described by and large as an able administration with beneficial effect for Bangladesh, inducing an element of stability in the new state. With commendable balance the author sets out the seemingly incompatible dual traits of Zia's personality: his dedication and honesty, incorruptibility and constructive approach in politics which had gained him popularity towards the end of his reign – on the other hand his constant suspicion and ruthless suppression of rivalries and revolts within the army, his treachery against old comrades like Abu Taher and his overall sanguinary record which in the end proved his undoing. With respect to Zia's assassination in Chittagong the author seems to accept the official version of general Manzoor's central role without discussing controversial details. He hints, however, at the possibility of a wider conspiracy and the possible implication of General Ershad (p. 143). But he does not comment on the ominous

parallel between the way Ershad and Ziaur Rahman emerged from the background as wielders of power, after the killing had been done by others.

Ershad's regime receives perhaps the most sympathetic treatment of the three. After Zia's death and after the initial unrest stirred by the hasty execution of 12 officers court-martialled for complicity in the murder, a certain calm came to the country. In the army the old dissensions between Freedom Fighters and Repatriates had come to an end since the Freedom Fighters had been decimated and finally subdued. The leader of the Repatriate group, the new army chief General Ershad could thus afford to be a "bland" ruler in comparison with Zia or Mujib (p. 153). He seized power in a bloodless coup forcing out the country's elected President Sattar who is conveniently described as "tired" (p. 153, 155). He indeed dispensed with political executions and preferred soft methods of compulsion. The author seems inclined to buy some of Ershad's rhetoric about eradication of corruption and efficient administration. His reforms in local government are described as substantial and promising. Finally, Ershad's long drawn out tug of war with political opposition, his "civilianization policy", gradual restoration of the Constitution and elections, his confrontation with students and attempts to infiltrate Dhaka University are dealt with at some length and with the background of the author's personal knowledge. The eventual downfall of Ershad is attributed to a concerted, relentless agitation by the opposition parties, dubbed a "violent orgy" (p. 203). The constructive contributions of the opposition alliance, the induction of a non-partisan caretaker government to hold elections – meanwhile regularized as part of the Bangladesh Constitution – do not receive attention. There is almost a note of regret about Ershad's ouster. "Although accused of being a dictator, his rule was more benign than ruthless." (p. 171)

Such an assessment of the deposed ruler certainly has a ring of fairness. But it must be noted also that throughout the book there is a discernible bias and tendency to see order and direction represented in the military and conversely chaos and selfish personal aggrandizement in the politicians. There is an underlying option for the "civil-military institution" as an instrument of stability and progress all too familiar from Pakistan history. The question remains whether such an approach is supported by the experience of Bangladesh under the three rulers as told herein. It has to be added that the historical account is sufficiently balanced to enable the reader to draw his own conclusions, and he will be grateful to the author for this comprehensive and vivid portrait of a turbulent period. In sum, therefore, the book is a valuable contribution to the political history of Bangladesh.

Dieter Conrad

ANTHONY REID (ed.), *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750–1900*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. XX, 458 pages, Glossary, Maps, Index, \$ 75. ISBN 0-333-68825-2

This volume consists of a collection of seventeen important articles, together with an introduction by editor Anthony Reid, on early modern (and mainly) Southeast Asia. It represents the culmination of three years of collaboration, funded by the