

# Left movement in post-independence era

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THE division that the international left movement witnessed after Peking and Moscow parted company with each other has left its lasting impact on the leftist movement and its cause globally. The situation has further worsened after the dissolution of Soviet Union in early 1990s and the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s choosing the path of capitalistic road to development. The failure of the local leftist movement has a lot to do with this international scenario.



Photo: Amirul Rajiv

**Prelude:** The history of the leftist politics in Bangladesh is inextricably linked to its pre-independence legacy. In the pre-independence period, the left political movement drew a lot of prestige from the common people. Even those who could not see eye to eye with the ideology and politics pursued by the leftists, they still held them with esteem, if only for their honesty and selflessness. Student activists in the opposition political camp and general students were likewise respectful of left student activists. Small wonder the cultural landscape of the country's urban centres including Dhaka was dominated by left-oriented cultural activists. But despite this ideological-moral high ground they enjoyed, the house of the leftist politics remained divided among different camps. As a consequence, they could not cash in on their successes made during many political movements. Whenever any crisis was created in the life of the nation and the people, it was the leftist progressive forces that appeared first on the scene and worked shoulder to shoulder with the masses of the people to overcome those. In 1952's Language Movement, in 1954's Jukto (united) Front)-led election against Muslim League government, in the 1960s' students movement and in the 1969's anti-Ayub mass upsurge, it was the left political parties and their student fronts that were at the forefront. Finally in the war of liberation despite hurdles created by reactionary quarters from within the ranks of the independence war, they fought alongside the people.

The war of independence brought a big opportunity before them to close their ranks and forge a broader unity among themselves as well as with other progressive political forces and establish people's leadership in the war of liberation.

Unfortunately, that was not to be. The pro-Soviet communist party, East Pakistan Communist Party, together with Awami League fought in the liberation war from India. But the pro-Peking left, which was already divided into a number of camps failed to participate in the war from a common ground. On the contrary, a section of them fought the war from India. Among them were the group of Deben Sikder and Abul Bashar. Amal Sen, a veteran communist and erstwhile left student leaders Kazi Jafar Ahmed, Rashed Khan Menon along with Nasim Ali-led breakaway faction (known as Hatier group) of pro-Moscow communist party formed the Purbo Banglar Communist Samonnoy Parishad (East Bengal Communist Coordination Council) and fought the war with the permission from the Bangladesh government in exile. Their headquarters was Shibpur near Dhaka with Mannan Bhuiyan as the head of the guerrilla war of resistance against the Pakistani occupation forces.

There was also the group led by Purbo Banglar Communist Party of Abdul Matin of 1952's Language Movement-fame and Alauddin Ahmed, who also believed in waging a people's war to wrest an independent people's republic of East Bengal. But they were against Indian intervention and Soviet Union's assistance in the war. Similar was the view of the Purba Bangla Sarbahara Party of Siraj Sikder, who fought in the war from within the country. Another group represented by Shukhendu Dastidar, Abdul Huq and Mohammad Toaha, the most orthodox among the pro-Peking factions, was sceptical of Awami League's leadership in the

liberation struggle due to its class character. For, according to their analysis, the Awami League represented the non-productive lumpen bourgeoisie, commission agents of foreign monopoly capital, middlemen and local feudal interests. Similarly, they were against the role of Soviet Union and Indian support for and intervention in the war. Because, to them, India was an expansionist power, while the then Soviet Union an imperialist power (they dubbed it Soviet social imperialist). So, they concluded during and after the war that India had virtually occupied Bangladesh, while Soviet Union remained its international mentor. They did not shift from their stance even after the creation of independent Bangladesh until the late 1970s.

During first Awami League government: The tumultuous phase of transition during the liberation war and the new reality that presented itself before the left movement after the emergence of Bangladesh, moulded the future course of Bangladesh's left politics in an irreversible manner. For the very existence of Bangladesh as an independent nation came in the way of the more orthodox section of the communists' dream of correcting history and recreating the ideal situation for the kind of national liberation war they fancied. In fact, the first few years after independence played a crucial role in the left movement's latter-day development. As noted in the foregoing, the liberation war of 1971 brought the pro-Soviet Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) closer to the Awami League. Awami League represented the aspirations of the rising Bengali middle class, whose rallying cry was first realising full autonomy from the central government in West Pakistan and then going all out for independence. Naturally, its ideology was ultra-nationalistic. The pro-Soviet wing of the leftist movement made a common cause with the Awami League because the Soviet Russia had thrown its full weight behind 1971's war and to this end helped India, which in turn provided the freedom fighters with shelter, training as well as arms and weapons. So, the agenda of socialist revolution under CPB's leadership in post-Bangladesh context was marked by its continued alliance with the ruling party Awami League. At the same time, it maintained its organisational activities with limited objectives of economic struggles geared to agricultural reforms and trade union movements for better pay and rights of the labourers. At that time, the Soviet Union pursued the policy of non-capitalistic development in many post-colonial third world countries. The public sector in the recipient country was the main beneficiary of Soviet assistance. The Indian public sector had long been receiving such Soviet help. The post-liberation Bangladesh government, too, proved to be a potential recipient of such Soviet assistance as it (Bangladesh) declared socialism as one of its four fundamental state principles. The overall condition then was highly favourable for the pro-Soviet leftists to achieve their goal of socialism. First the head of the government and later head of state, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, too, was pursuing such a goal by nationalising industries, corporations, insurance companies, banks and many big businesses, especially those abandoned by Pakistani owners. In the arena of politics and governance, he introduced presidential system. In February 1975, he formed Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BKSAL) in which merged Awami League, the pro-Moscow Communist Party and the National Awami Party (NAP-Muzaffar) as well as many other smaller parties, groups and individuals. But the BKSAL could carry out its programme only for a few months until the brutal murder of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family members, the tragedy that brought the entire process to a sudden halt.

The pro-Chinese left parties, on the other hand, rejected this path of transition as they termed Awami League a force of reaction and stooge of, what they termed, expansionist India and the imperialist powers. Their view of the Soviet Russia, as mentioned in the foregoing, was that it was another brand of imperialism.

But during that brief period that the post-independence Awami League ruled the country, many new developments took place. The pro-Chinese left parties that worked in the underground came under severe government repression. The faction led by Alauddin, Matin, Tipu Biswas, et al waged a guerrilla campaign in the northern districts using the Maoist principle of encircling the cities with the villages freed from class enemies. The government crushed the upsurge with brute force. Many leaders and activists of the party were killed, wounded and arrested in the ensuing operations launched by police, the then Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), now defunct Rakkhi Bahini and finally the Army. Later, combing operations were carried out by police and Rakkhi Bahini in the areas where the underground parties worked including in the south and south-western districts in a bid to flush out the armed anti-government outfits. The main leaders Matin, Alauddin, Tipu Biswas etc were sent to jail. As a result, the movement could not make any further headway. Siraj Sikder-led Sarbahara Party, too, started urban-based armed guerrilla warfare against the Sheikh Mujib's government. But with his arrest and consequent murder at the hands of the security forces, his party's activities went into hibernation. These parties were later split up into several factions and could never again kindle similar sparks of militant movement against the government.



Photo: Amirul Rajiv

The pro-left multi-party platform National Awami Party (NAP) led by Maulna Bhasani, who boycotted the 1970's general election paving the way for Awami League's landslide victory, was the uniting force among the left and other progressive forces that were carrying put agitations against political repression, misrule and the government's failure to provide food, shelter, medicare, security and jobs to the people. In spite of his old age and related ailments, Maulana tried to rejuvenate the progressive democratic movement, held anti-government rallies, organised a number of conferences and conducted a long march against Farakka in order to make India understand the devastation the barrage has inflicted on the lower riparian Bangladesh.

Besides this traditional communist movement, another leftist movement comprising mainly a section of the freedom fighters and a faction of the pro-Awami League student front, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) got disillusioned with post-liberation socio-economic situation in Bangladesh and particularly of the Awami league government's way of running the country. They launched a socialist party titled Jatiya Samajtrantik Dal (JSD), which in English may be rendered as National Socialist Party. In its manifesto, the party declared that its aim was to establish socialism. From the orthodox Marxist point of view that meant the Bangladesh society, which would be their domain of revolution, had already reached the capitalistic phase. But their party manifesto did not clearly spell out how and when the Bangladesh society had undergone the transition from a backward socio-economic condition dominated by feudal relations to the capitalistic phase and how had the necessary historical step of bourgeoisie democratic revolution been completed, the precondition for socialist revolution. Naturally, this stance of JSD distanced itself from the traditional camp of left parties. The guiding personality of the party was Sirajul Alam Khan, a veteran student leader and organiser of freedom fighters during liberation war, while at the forefront of the party were famous student leader ASM Abdur Rab and a liberation war-veteran Major (ret'd) Jalil. Immediately after its birth, the party launched a militant struggle against the Sheikh Mujib's government criticising its corruption, misrule and repression on opposition political parties. This party at a stage formed, what it termed, Gono Bahini (people's army) to carry out their own brand of revolution. As it did in the case of other left parties and their movements, so also did the government come down heavily on the agitation programmes launched by JSD. Hundreds of their leaders and workers were arrested, others injured and killed, forcing many party leaders and activists to go into hiding. The activities of this party declined significantly after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib.

Under military rules: The post-Mujib period, be it Khondker Mustaq Ahmed's brief rule or the military rules of Ziaur Rahman or that of Hussein Mohammad Ershad, was marked by absence of serious anti-government movement under the leadership of the left organisations. However, there was a lot of activities within their

respective camps to reorganise, build broad unity and so on using the relatively less aggressive policies pursued by those governments against the left political parties in general.

However, the Ziaur Rahman's rule was marked by his attempts at winning over the pro-Peking left groups and coax them into joining his government. In the process, Kazi Jafar Ahmed of United People's Party (UPP)--the party was formed in 1973, and Moshir Rahman of National Awami party (NAP-Bhasani) joined his government leaving behind the rebels who either held the flag of their original parties aloft or liquidated the original party to form new ones. With these defecting individuals, groups from leftists camp as well as the rightists parties like Muslim League and breakaway factions and individuals president Zia built his party, which ultimately was named Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). However, it cannot be categorised as a left party as it was in essence a party of the crony capital of the nouveau riches. However, the underground communist parties did not join the bandwagon. But they could not create any effective movement either. On the contrary, their activities were confined to inter-and-intra-faction rivalries and killing of one another's cadres in their bid to expand their spheres of influence. On the other hand, with most of their key leaders in the jail or in exile, the JSD and its student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL-Rab group), carried out some agitation programmes during President Zia's regime in protest against their leader Col (retd) Taher's hanging in a summary trial by a military court. However, the revived Awami League, its student front Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), its pro-Moscow left allies as well as some smaller groups and individuals did carry out agitation during president Zia's regime. Their struggle was for democratic rights and free elections. Excepting the pro-Moscow left parties, which were but playing the second fiddle to the Awami League, other left organisations, to all intents and purposes, remained outside of the picture.

The scenario, however, did not change to any significant measure during the long nine year's rule of Lt General Ershad, who usurped power after assassination of president Zia in 1982.

And like Zia, Ershad, too, followed a similar policy of wooing the left factions and breaking different mainstream parties.

The anti-autocracy movement against Ershad's rule, however was spearheaded by BNP under its new leader, the widowed wife of president Zia, Begum Khaleda Zia. Assassinated Sheikh Mujib's eldest daughter, Sheikh Hasina, on the other hand, was already at helm of the Awami League. Later, the Awami League also joined the anti-Ershad movement. There was, however, a militant student movement by Bangladesh Chhatra Dal (BCD), the student wing of the BNP and BCL of Awami League, where a combination of pro-left student bodies also participated. But then, the leadership of the movement remained largely in the hands of the ruling classes of one variety or the other.

Rule by elected governments: The picture have changed little on the left front, even though, meanwhile, two decades have passed under the alternating rules of elected governments of BNP and Awami League. Some of the left groups and individuals formed election alliances with and joined the government of incumbent Awami League. Among them are the Hasanul Huq Inu-led faction of JSD, Rashed Khan Menon of Workers party and Dilip Barua of pro-Peking Samyabadi Dal. Organisationally, these left parties are in name only without any penetration among the broad masses of the people.

Meanwhile, a faction of the reorganised pro-Peking communists, the Purba Banglar Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) got some publicity for their activities confined to killing, what they label, and their class enemies. The path of their brand of revolution follows that of Charu Majumder, an Indian left wing communist party leader of Naxalbari peasant revolt fame. This party, for its extremely left wing activities concentrated in a few pockets in the Northern, Western and South-western parts of Bangladesh, has drawn the wrath of the ruling class resulting in systematic decimation of their leaders and workers at by the security forces.

The extreme left-wing trend in the communist movement (especially among the pro-Peking groups) since the late 1960s has robbed it of its popular political base. They adopted this path in the name of armed revolution as opposed to open political struggles by broad masses for achieving their democratic rights, against misrule, oppression, repression, corruption, workers' and peasants' economic rights and demands and

so on. Participating in the elections could also be a form of struggle to test their popularity. It is worthwhile to note that after the death of stalwarts like Maulana Bhasani, no other leader of equal stature could emerge to fill the vacuum left by him in the progressive political arena. As a consequence, the left camp has not been able to float another broad-based open multi-class platform like the NAP to reach out to the mass people with their programmes.

**Conclusion:** The division that the international left movement witnessed after Peking and Moscow parted company with each other has left its lasting impact on the leftist movement and its cause globally. The situation has further worsened after the dissolution of Soviet Union in early 1990s and the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s choosing the path of capitalistic road to development. The failure of the local leftist movement has a lot to do with these international developments. But as the leftist or communist movement should grow and flourish within the specific historical and socio-economic contexts of a given country, the excuse of international factor cannot fully absolve the local leadership of its responsibilities in this respect.