

UNHAPPY ECHOES IN DHAKA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Bangladesh

© 2019 The Indian Express Ltd.

All Rights Reserved

Allchin, a journalist and writer, is the author of *Many Rivers One Sea: Bangladesh and the Challenge of Islamist Militancy*

It is an extraordinary image. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) posing, no less, holding hands with Henry Kissinger, surrounded by a bevy of grinning former world leaders. For many with a memory, or an interest in Bangladesh, it also conjured a muffled, 1970s recording from the White House in which Kissinger is heard talking about India with his then boss, [Richard Nixon](#). The pair can be heard calling Indians “b*****s” and wishing a famine on the country. This racist tirade, in which the astute Henry seems to encourage his vain boss’s stale whims, erupted at a time when India was supporting the emergence of an independent, secular Bangladesh. Today, Modi’s policies are arguably doing exactly as Nixon and Kissinger’s attempted back in 1971 — driving religious and communal division.

Kissinger and Nixon were, of course, ardent supporters of Pakistan’s military, as it and its Bengali proxies committed genocide, in erstwhile East Bengal, and in particular of its Hindus. While Pakistan split, a vindictive attitude towards India in American policy did not necessarily diminish; within only a few years, Bangladesh’s independence hero, Sheikh Mujib was killed in 1975, and a pro-West/Pakistan/Chinese government took over in a coup supported by American intelligence. In American cables from that era, anti-Indian attitudes reach obsessive, paranoid levels. Military-run Dhaka immediately ramped up arms spending, from the West and from China — as the embassy and General Ziaur Rahman earnestly prepared for a fantasy Indian invasion, like schoolboys moving model soldiers about an imaginary battlefield.

Today, Mujib’s daughter, Sheikh Hasina is in power in Dhaka. However, there are two mutually hostile forces which she has had to try and assuage through her long years in office: The communal/religious-right internally and New Delhi. This has not been straightforward.

Before the Muslim Rohingya refugees crossed into Bangladesh, fleeing genocide in 2016-17, Bangladesh’s borders were apparently “sealed”. This long-marginalised Burmese community was not Hasina’s problem, she said. However, official policy was no medicine for the sheer desperation that flooded into Bangladesh on those brutalised Burmese shoulders. “Sealed” meant little either to members of Bangladesh’s security services, who were, probably, both unwilling and unable to enforce the integrity of the border.

However, Hasina’s position towards the community changed, not only when her government clearly lacked the ability to physically stop the influx but also when she saw how once fierce critics of her government, the religious right, saw in this tragedy a reason to project their anger outwards. Suddenly, a strange bonhomie existed between the Islamist Muftis in Dhaka and elsewhere, and her Awami League. The enemy was no longer “Lady Hitler” as Hasina is often described by her Islamist adversaries; instead someone else, someone distant and external was. Like a feuding couple suddenly turning their ire towards the neighbours, instead of one another.

This was never Hasina’s plan. She never wanted one million new residents, but as the permutations of ethnic cleansing progressed, she played it well. And, just as in Pakistan, the “out

group enemy”, Myanmar’s supposedly Buddhist rulers, drew the brunt of the Islamists’ anger — who for years tendentiously accused Hasina of being part of an “anti-Islam” conspiracy.

Indeed, this dynamic is crucial to Pakistani policy making and the Lashkar-e-Taiba owes its patronage and existence to it. It was then not surprising when Pakistani politicians started referencing the Ghazwa-e-Hind prophecy — found in the Hadiths — in response to Modi’s draconian policy lurches on Jammu and Kashmir.

This prophecy was also harked to in one of Bangladesh’s worst terrorist attacks — on Dhaka’s Holey restaurant in 2016. The ISIS cell termed their killing spree, “Operation Ghazwa-e-Hind”. The attack claimed the lives of some two-dozen hostages, including an Indian national, Tarishi Jain. Women were especially targeted with unspeakable brutality by a group of young Bangladeshis — who months prior had mainly been regular students — some from extremely privileged backgrounds.

This attack was not dissimilar to LeT’s 2008 attack on Mumbai — an inghimasi attack where the assailants try to cause maximum damage over an extended period of time, with no intention of survival. Both aspired to draw a wedge between the Muslims and non-Muslims. Both viewed confrontation not only as prophesied and therefore, inherently blessed, but also targeted establishments which for them embodied secular progress or aspiration.

The merging of conspiracy, prophecy and geopolitics is arguably pursued even more effectively by al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent — the other major transnational jihadist group that has found adherents in Bangladesh. It emerged in 2014 and their Egyptian leader, Ayman Al Zawahiri, seems plugged in to conspiratorial obsessions of Bangladesh’s right-wing, as well as those of Modi.

“The events in Bangladesh enjoy the blessings of both India and America, since their interests in fighting Islam overlap,” he claimed. He also seems able to share obsessions with Modi. In 2014, Zawahiri claimed that, “the events in Bangladesh and Burma are not too distant from the oppression and killings of Muslims in Kashmir or the racial cleansing in Assam, Gujarat and Ahmadabad either.”

In 1971, Modi’s friend Henry was, instead, holding hands with the Pakistani generals, as they facilitated his then secret (and ultimately futile) rapprochement with China. Hasina will not be able to contain extremist, anti-India voices in Bangladesh for ever, especially as the Modi government’s anti-Muslim agenda ramps up.

The threat of yet more desperate people fleeing into Bangladesh, means Hasina may well have to project understandable anger in Bangladesh outwards, for her government’s integrity. Unlike her father, however, she has friends in China, with unmatched economic muscle. And the more Modi alienates Bangladeshis, the more the smile will grow from Beijing to the Brahmaputra.

Allchin, a journalist and writer, is the author of Many Rivers One Sea: Bangladesh and the Challenge of Islamist Militancy

Download the Indian Express apps for iPhone, iPad or Android

© 2019 The Indian Express Ltd. All Rights Reserved

END

CrackIAS.com