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The Politics of Bangladesh

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Introduction

Bangladesh, a country born of a tumultuous struggle for independence, has forged a dynamic and complex political landscape. Its journey from colonial subjugation to sovereign statehood has been marked by momentous events, ideological contestations, and perennial challenges. Today, Bangladesh stands as a parliamentary representative democratic republic, navigating the tides of history while seeking to realize the ambitions of its independence movement. This book, "The Politics of Bangladesh: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Bangladesh," aims to provide a comprehensive exploration and analysis of the country's unique political system, the actors who define it, and the issues that shape the lives of its citizens.

The origin of modern Bangladeshi politics lies in the ashes of its 1971 liberation war against Pakistan. The narrative of sacrifice, unity, and aspiration that powered the independence movement remains foundational to the nation's political culture. The country's early years were characterized by an embrace of parliamentary democracy, quickly followed by a period of military intervention and autocratic rule. With the restoration of democracy in 1991, Bangladesh entered a new era of contestable politics, albeit one still beset with deep-seated rivalries and recurring crises.

At the heart of Bangladeshi politics is a fiercely competitive, often adversarial, relationship between its two principal parties—the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The resulting polarization has shaped governance, policymaking, and even popular culture, often manifesting in protests, political violence, and recurring demands for electoral reforms. Over the decades, the country has experimented with innovative institutional mechanisms—most notably the caretaker government system—aimed at ensuring fair electoral contests, but these too have not been free of controversy.

This book delves into the constitutional architecture underpinning the Bangladeshi state, examining how its features—from the role of the President and Prime Minister to the structure of the judiciary and parliament—inform the day-to-day realities of governance. The political evolution of Bangladesh is not merely a tale of institutions, however; it is also a story of people, movements, and the perennial quest for social justice and better governance. Local government, women's participation, ethnic minorities, youth activism, and the influence of Islam all play pivotal roles in shaping the contemporary political scene.

The challenges before Bangladesh are significant. Issues of corruption, weak democratic institutions, politicized law enforcement, and military influence all cast long shadows. Yet, there are signs of resilience and renewal. Recent years have seen

robust debates on constitutional reform, the emergence of new political actors—including student-led parties—and ongoing efforts to achieve meaningful electoral and governance reforms.

As Bangladesh moves forward, the direction of its politics will depend on the ability of leaders and citizens alike to build mutual trust, foster inclusive dialogue, and strengthen democratic institutions. This book aspires to serve as both an introduction and a companion to understanding the politics of Bangladesh: its history, its turbulence, and its enduring hope for a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic future.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Foundations of Bangladeshi Politics

The political narrative of Bangladesh is deeply rooted in the shared history of Bengal, a region that has for centuries been a melting pot of cultures, religions, and power dynamics. Before the lines of partition were drawn, Bengal was a unified entity under various rulers, from ancient kingdoms to the Mughal Empire. The British colonial period, which began in the mid-18th century, profoundly reshaped this landscape, introducing new administrative structures and economic policies that would have lasting consequences. The British conquest of Bengal in 1757, following the Battle of Plassey, marked the end of the last independent Nawab's rule and ushered in an era of foreign dominance that would last for nearly two centuries.

During British rule, Bengal was a significant province, known for its rich agricultural lands and vibrant cultural life, particularly centered around Calcutta (now Kolkata). However, this period also saw growing economic disparities and political oppression, which sowed the seeds of discontent among the local population. Various resistance movements emerged, reflecting a burgeoning sense of cultural identity among Bengalis. These early expressions of defiance against colonial rule were crucial in setting the stage for later movements demanding autonomy and, eventually, independence. The political consciousness of the region began to stir, fueled by a combination of economic grievances and a growing awareness of a distinct Bengali identity.

The early 20th century witnessed a significant political event that would have a profound impact on the future of Bengal: the Partition of Bengal in 1905. This administrative division by the British, ostensibly for ease of governance, was widely seen as an attempt to weaken the burgeoning Bengali nationalist movement by dividing the province along religious lines. The resulting protests and unrest, particularly from the Hindu community in West Bengal, were so intense that the partition was annulled in 1911. While this annulment was a victory for the anti-partition movement, the episode highlighted the growing religious divide within Bengal and the potential for political mobilization along communal lines.

The political landscape of Bengal in the decades leading up to the end of British rule was complex and dynamic. Various political parties and leaders vied for influence, representing diverse interests and ideologies. The Indian National Congress, though a prominent force across British India, faced challenges in Bengal, where regional leaders and parties also held sway. The All-India Muslim League, formed in Dhaka in 1906, gained traction among the Muslim population, advocating for their political

rights and eventually demanding a separate homeland for Muslims in British India. This period saw shifting alliances and political maneuvering as different groups sought to position themselves favorably in the lead-up to independence.

The 1930s and 1940s were particularly crucial years, with provincial elections and the formation of ministries under a limited self-governance framework. Leaders like A. K. Fazlul Huq, who led the Krishak Praja Party and served as Chief Minister of Bengal, played significant roles in articulating the aspirations of the Bengali peasantry. His presentation of the Lahore Resolution in 1940, which envisioned independent states for Muslims in the subcontinent, was a pivotal moment, although he was later expelled from the Muslim League. These years of legislative politics provided valuable experience, albeit within the constraints of colonial rule, for Bengali politicians who would later shape the destiny of independent Bangladesh.

As the prospect of independence from British rule became increasingly likely after World War II, the question of how to divide the subcontinent along religious lines took center stage. The idea of Pakistan, a separate state for Muslims, gained momentum, particularly within the Muslim League. This created a dilemma for Bengal, a province with a large Muslim majority in the eastern part and a significant Hindu population in the western part. The political climate became charged with communal tension, and violence erupted in various parts of Bengal, most notably the Calcutta Killings of 1946. These tragic events underscored the deep divisions that had emerged and the immense challenges of achieving a peaceful transition.

Ultimately, the decision was made to partition Bengal once again in 1947, as part of the larger Partition of British India. This second partition divided the province into West Bengal, which remained with India, and East Bengal, which became a province of the newly formed Dominion of Pakistan. The division was based on religious majority, with Muslim-majority areas forming East Bengal and Hindu-majority areas forming West Bengal. This division, however, was far from clean, resulting in mass displacement and violence as millions of people found themselves on the "wrong" side of the newly drawn border.

The creation of East Bengal as part of Pakistan in 1947 marked a new chapter in the political history of the region. Geographically separated from West Pakistan by over a thousand miles of Indian territory, East Bengal was distinct in its linguistic and cultural identity, primarily Bengali, in contrast to the Urdu-speaking majority in West Pakistan. This geographical and cultural disconnect would prove to be a significant factor in the political developments of the following decades. The initial years of Pakistan saw East Bengal, later renamed East Pakistan in 1955, grappling with its new identity and its relationship with the distant central government in West Pakistan.

The political aspirations of the Bengali population in East Pakistan soon clashed with the policies of the Pakistani government, which was largely dominated by West

Pakistani elites. One of the most significant early points of contention was the issue of language. The Pakistani government's attempt to impose Urdu as the sole state language of Pakistan was met with fierce resistance in East Bengal, where Bengali was spoken by the vast majority of the population. This linguistic discrimination was seen as an attack on Bengali identity and culture, sparking the Bengali Language Movement in 1952.

The Language Movement was a pivotal moment, demonstrating the strong sense of linguistic and cultural nationalism among Bengalis. Student protests and demonstrations, met with brutal police action that resulted in deaths, galvanized the population and became a powerful symbol of resistance against West Pakistani dominance. The movement ultimately forced the Pakistani government to recognize Bengali as one of the state languages in 1956. The Language Movement was not just about language; it was a manifestation of deeper political and economic grievances and a demand for equal rights and recognition. It significantly increased the role of the Bengali middle class and transformed the student community into a potent political force.

The years following the Language Movement saw growing political awareness and mobilization in East Pakistan. Regional political parties, such as the Awami League, gained prominence, advocating for greater provincial autonomy and challenging the central government's authority. The political struggle between East and West Pakistan intensified, marked by periods of constitutional negotiation, political maneuvering, and the imposition of martial law. The Bengali population increasingly felt marginalized and exploited by the West Pakistani establishment, leading to a growing demand for self-determination. The seeds of independence were sown in these years of political struggle and cultural assertion.

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