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Bangla Begum's India Visit: Real or Ephemeral?

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By Bhaskar Roy

Can ideology and political agenda change overnight? At least, that is the message Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson and former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia carried when she arrived in India on October 28 for an eight-day visit.

Begum Zia came at the invitation of the Government of India. There have been some comments that this is a change in India's Bangladesh strategy. This is not correct.

Certainly, following the assassination of Sk. Mujibur Rahaman in August 1975, New Delhi felt betrayed. The operation to kill Sk. Mujib was a cooperative venture between the USA (read mainly Secretary of State Henry Kissenger), Pakistan, and a group of Bangladeshis who pretended to be pro-liberation but were trying to reverse history. Hence, not only the government of India but the Indian people at large burst out with a series of emotions.

Relations began to improve when Gen. H.M. Ershad became president of Bangladesh. From the 1990s, the Indian government adopted the policy that India will be nice to Bangladesh and 'hope Bangladesh' would reciprocate. And this policy was irrespective of the political party in power at the centre.

With economic liberalization in the early 1990s under Prime Minister Narsimha Rao and architected by Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, India began to grow. But the growth story would be a greater success if the neighbours also grew together.

But that did not happen. Pakistan expectedly remained the spoiler. But there was a great opportunity for Bangladesh to join India. The

entire Bangladeshi policies went through a regressive storm, especially during the BNP's rule from 2001 to 2006. The ruling four-party alliance comprising mainly of the BNP and JFI marked India as the main enemy. Those were tense years. The JFI spoke about winning the majority in Parliament by 2013 and bringing Bangladesh under Sharia law. Some BNP leaders also floated an idea of confederation type of relationship with Pakistan.

The BNP-JFI coalition gave enough opportunities to India to react strongly on the ground. It was not only of attacks on Hindus just after the elections which saw Hindu migration to India. An Indian Border Security Force (BSF) officer was abducted from Indian Territory by Bangladeshi villagers assisted by the Bangladeshi border force, the BDR, tortured and killed, and his body taken around tied to a bamboo pole, and photographs widely printed in the media. Had the BSF retaliated, the BDR would have been routed. But calmer political counsel prevailed in New Delhi. Then were many other incidents of provocation.

A major insurgency in North-East India was prevented when ten-truck loads of arms landed in the Chittagong port in April 2004 was accidentally detected. The BNP-JFI government tried to paper over the incident. These arms were meant for the Assam insurgents ULFA, the Naga insurgents and others.

This case is in the court now, and witness' statements reveal that those involved include Begum Zia's elder son Tareq Rehemani, de facto leader of the BNP, the then Minister of State for Home, Lutfozzaman Babar, JFI Chief Motiur Rehemani Nizami, and a host of intelligence officers. Pakistan's ISI funded the operation through a media front. The arms were brought from China.

During her meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid, Begum Zia assured they will support anti-terrorism policy and would not allow Bangladesh's territory to be used against India. When asked by journalists on the BNP's position on the Chittagong arms haul case, one of Khaleda Zia's spokesmen said if they returned to power the case would be reinvestigated by an independent body. This gives lie to all the nice pronouncements.

Khaleda Zia is on record to say that if her party came to power all agreements with India signed by the present Awami League government would be annulled. The BNP opposed the transport corridor for India to its North-East on several grounds. The most important reason proffered was if an India-China war broke out, India will be able transfer arms and troops quickly through Bangladesh to its border, and it would annoy China.

The BNP cannot do without the JEI and the other anti-India radical parties. The JEI has its fixed agenda and has close relations with the terrorist organizations some of which have begun to stir against. Connections of some of the BNP leaders including that of Tareq Reheman with terrorist organizations is well known and recorded. BNP-JEI terrorists form a triangular relationship which Khaleda Zia cannot discard. She knows that if she does so, she will be creating two new and dangerous enemies. She is caught in that vicious trap. Khaleda cannot afford to support the Liberation War Crimes trial because it would be counter-productive.

Begum Khaleda Zia's sudden change is a riddle. Before coming to India she visited China on a party invitation and a high level Chinese led by Politburo Standing Committee member Li Changchun was in Dhaka and held discussions with her and her party leaders. At the moment the Chinese do not want instability in South Asia and would have advised Khaleda to mend relations with India. China had in the past months also advised Pakistan to improve relations with India. For Beijing, Indian influence is preferable to American influence.

After a whole history of anti-Indianism, a sudden showering of goodwill from the BNP is difficult to digest. For India it will be good if the BNP adopts a normal relationship with India. If not, the status quo will remain and Bangladesh's economic development will be hurt. It will be for the voters of Bangladesh to judge that at the next elections just over a year ahead.

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