



William B. Milam. *Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. xii + 276 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70066-5.



Reviewed by Subho Basu

Published on H-Asia (September, 2012)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Bangladesh and Pakistan

Flirtation connotes an affective relationship, and is an odd word to associate with an abstract political concept such as *state failure*.¹ Though the term *state failure*² has not been explained in it, the book provides us with a vivid picture of the crisis of governance in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Based on his personal experience as the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan and Bangladesh, William Milam tells a story of high politics in both these countries. He believes that individual rulers, through their personal charisma, administrative capabilities, and political foresight, transform a nation. In Milam's account, the common people are absent and remain passive recipients of the designs of rulers. Political institutions are referred to as a framework within which leaders operate, but they are assumed to be self-explanatory. The storyline, then, is simple: in Bangladesh Mujibur Rehman was the villain who pushed the country into anarchy and chaos. Milam claims that while Mujib was excellent in mobilizing the masses, he had but little administrative experience; he succumbed to the pressure of left-wing ideologues in his administration but did not fully implement

their proposals except for the nationalization of industry; and cronyism and corruption became the hallmark of his so-called secular administration. Mujib, Milam claims, deliberately ignored the army and encouraged factionalism in the military that was already deeply politicized. This ultimately led to his tragic demise in a military coup d'état. What is surprising in this account is the complete absence of any reference to the massive human casualties that Bangladesh suffered during the civil war. Neither does Milam mention why the U.S. administration provided tacit support to the Pakistani military junta when it was engaged in genocide in Bangladesh. The problem that Mujib faced was not simply that of a structural dislocation but also that of anger over Pakistani genocide, and the attendant pain and loss. His regime also faced international isolation because of his close political proximity to the Soviet bloc. Milam also ignores the simple fact that Mujib headed a class alliance of rich peasants, professional elites, and petty traders, and therefore had limited choices to implement reforms. Yet contrary to popular perception, Mujib in his final days became far more

lukewarm to the Left within the party. Tajuddin Ahmed, a leading pro-Soviet politician and a hero of the national liberation war, was completely sidelined by Mujib. The military coup that led to Mujib's death and subsequent coups must be located in personal grudges as well as ideological conflicts where both the political Left as well as forces hostile to Mujib's secular experimentation wanted to capture political power. Zia came to power when ordinary soldiers loyal to the leftist National Socialist Party sought to capture power. Zia initially took their help but later brutally suppressed them.

For Milam, General Ziaur Rahman was the hero who rescued the nation through his great administrative skills and pragmatism. However, a more serious examination of Ziaur Rahman's regime reveals the picture of a ruler who can hardly be considered benign. He was a shrewd political manipulator who murdered the very people who brought him to power. His ruthless purge of the army led to deaths of many, and his move towards democracy was a mere façade to gain popular legitimacy for a military regime. He later embraced territorial nationalism of a more Islamic variety because of the compulsion to create an alternative to Mujib's secular nationalist ideology. Indeed, Zia was responsible for a militarized civilian regime that became a model for governance and inspired future coups in Bangladesh. As these regimes lacked political legitimacy, they flirted with Islam and restricted democracy further. While Milam does recognize this, his appreciation of Zia clouds his analysis of such a legacy. He also underestimates the ties between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat-e-Islami and is, understandably, blind to the crimes against humanity encouraged by the Jamaat leader Golem Azam during the civil war. A critical factor behind the rise of Jamaat and various other Islamist forces in Bangladesh was the failure to try them for the war crimes they committed during the civil war.

More importantly, what Milam fails to appreciate is that Bangladesh is not a tabula rasa waiting to be written upon by the leaders. The resistance of subaltern social classes, factional interest politics among different elite groups, and ideological positioning by diverse political actors shaped the policies of the state. Indeed, Milam is much more confident when he engages with the Ershad, and the post-Ershad period of politics in Bangladesh. His personal experience of high politics and political pressure from below provides him with a greater understanding of events. He blames the pernicious political culture under democracy without realizing that in a nation dominated by a young, underemployed labor force with little oppor-

tunity for social mobility, partisan politics became the vehicle for the articulation of anger. Streets are more readily accessible to these underemployed young people than the institutional edifices of politics and its cloistered layers. More importantly, without mass mobilization on the street, ruling political elites often remained immune to parliamentary pressures. Between elections, therefore, streets remain the principal theater of politics. To expect constitutional democracy to operate smoothly in a society characterized by a skewed distribution of wealth, and the lack of opportunities for social mobility for a vast majority, demonstrates Milam's rather stark unfamiliarity with state-society relationships in resource-scarce economies.

Milam similarly sees Pakistani politics through the lens of high politics. Here too he follows a familiar path of discussing the strengths of different political leaders. He superbly analyzes the pernicious impact of the Zia regime on the culture of governance in Pakistan. However, the militarization of Pakistani society was not simply a postcolonial development. The areas that came to constitute Pakistan were peripheral areas of the British Empire in India, which were often more indirectly governed. Baluchistan and parts of North-Western Province had often been governed through special paramilitary forces such as the Frontier Scouts. Even in Punjab, the British imperial army played a crucial role in civil life since the 1857 Rebellion, and became a social institution in rural society. After independence, Punjab supplied the largest number of recruits to the army, which in turn organized the economic and social life in rural society. Zia departed from the earlier tradition by institutionalizing the army at different levels of civilian life, and invoked Islam to legitimize such action. But again Milam offers little that is not known. Unless one directs attention to the everyday life of common people in both large urban slums and rural areas, as well as to the absence of social amenities and elite indifference, narrating stories of high politics amounts simply to chasing red herrings. The absence of land reforms, transparent grassroots-level democratic institutions, and social commitment to the poor are among the many causes of Pakistan's political ailments. Change could come from below through collective social action, as was the case in Bangladesh where NGOs came to play a critical role in changing social life. Otherwise, whether in a military regime or a democracy, social elites tend to remain unaccountable to the poor; and 'good governance' is often a byword for the ability of the regime to silence the opposition rather than signifying meaningful transformations in social life of ordinary people.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Subho Basu. Review of Milam, William B., *Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33437>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.