

# CLASS, CLIENTELISM AND COMMUNAL POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH

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There have been dramatic swings in the fortunes of communal politics in Bangladesh. In the 1940s the swing of a large part of the Bengali Muslim middle classes and rich peasants to the Pakistan movement played a critical role in the creation of Pakistan. Shortly afterwards, the equally dramatic swing of a large part of these same classes away from their commitment to an Islamic identity led eventually to the breakup of Pakistan in 1971. Thus recent Bangladeshi history provides examples of the victory of both “communalism” and “secularism” in quick succession. Given this history, it is surprising that Bangladesh's attempts to define itself as a nation has not played a much greater role in the analysis of nationalism in the Indian subcontinent.

At the very least the Bangladesh debacle should have led to fundamental questions being raised about the validity of the two-nation theory in what remained of Pakistan. But not only has the Pakistani version of the two-nation theory survived, new attempts have been made in India to define nationhood in religious terms. The re-writing of history that this has involved has been strongly contested by progressive Indian

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historians, including amongst others, Irfan Habib (for instance see Habib 1999). Despite these challenges, one reason why many in India passively acquiesced with the *Hindutva* experiment may be that it was seen as a route through which national unity could be achieved in a country whose internal divisions seemed to be preventing political stability and economic development. In this context, the experience of Pakistan and Bangladesh in constructing *their* national identities raises serious questions about the viability of such a project.

Bangladesh was the result of two successive carve-ups, the first based on the communal ideology of the two-nation theory and the second based on its rejection in favour of linguistic nationalism. The product was a landmass with significantly greater linguistic and religious homogeneity compared to the other major subcontinental countries. Yet far from creating a stable state and a society with a clear sense of national identity, Bangladesh continues to be riven by conflict and dissent over what constitutes the fundamentals of its nationhood. While some forms of ethnic and communal conflict have indeed become muted as a result of the physical absence of some obvious “others”, there is no evidence that overall political stability has increased. New political disputes over nationhood have simply replaced old ones.

What has driven the emergence of competing conceptions of nationhood in Bangladesh, and why have none of the answers provided greater political stability to the country? Apart from ideological and cultural aspirations, economic interests have been central in Bangladesh as elsewhere in driving groups to define the “nation” and of course to define themselves as its representatives. To the extent that economic interests drove nationalism in Bangladesh, we have to explain why a series of “nationalist victories” did not result in a coherent ruling class emerging that could enforce political stability.

A number of possible explanations have been suggested in the literature. First, there is a Marxist-inspired literature that has explained nationalist conflicts in terms of underlying class conflicts. The problem this literature has to address is the following. While the underlying class conflicts have been relatively clear-cut, for instance between peasants and landlords or between capitalists and workers, the nationalist struggles they ostensibly generated were conflicts between more amorphous coalitions of classes. The eventual conflicts have been between *factions* composed of various classes, led by members of “intermediate classes” such as the petty bourgeoisie and rich peasants. Moreover, the most significant beneficiaries of these conflicts were not peasants or workers (even when the factions they predominantly supported won) but small groups from within the intermediate classes. The Marxist literature has responded by explaining these features in terms of leaders from the intermediate classes exploiting broader class grievances for their own ends (for instance, Umar 1980a; 1980b; Rahman & Azad 1990; Hashmi 1994). This does seem to explain why both capitalist accumulation and the real incomes of workers and poor peasants have often suffered following these conflicts.

However, a weakness in the simplistic Marxist analysis is that too much depends on the susceptibility of the masses to “false consciousness”. What enables the political leadership to exploit class grievances and exploitation in this way, not just once or even twice in a single generation but repeatedly? Secondly, while political entrepreneurs from these intermediate classes have clearly dominated politics in Bangladesh, these entrepreneurs have not represented the class interests of their own class once they get to power. The rich peasant or petty bourgeois politician who represents their class interest systematically is the exception rather than the rule. More typically, political leaders have represented *factional* interests, usually with very

negative effects for economic growth.

The role of factions is central to a second set of explanations that draws on the Weberian sociological tradition. In Bangladesh, as elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent, political action has not normally been organized by class organizations even though class conflicts have been intense in different periods. Rather, political conflicts have predominantly been between rival multi-class factions. The approach adopted by sociologists in the Weberian tradition has focussed on the role of patron-client networks and patrimonialism in defining political agendas (for instance Khan, Islam and Haque 1996). This approach suggests that charismatic and arbitrary leaders control the “neo-patrimonial” state in Bangladesh. The competition between factions headed by charismatic leaders with different ideological agendas explains the intense political instability that we observe.

The problem with this approach is that while national conflicts have clearly been dominated by competing patron-client networks, this patron-client approach is divorced from an analysis of the economic interests of the participants. It does not explain why patron-client networks have been able to exercise such power and have been able to define the contours of major social conflicts. In Weber's original story, charismatic leaders were able to play such a role in pre-modern societies because they enjoyed traditional legitimacy. It is difficult to argue that modern Bangladeshi leaders have enjoyed such a tradition-based legitimacy. Rather, their limited and fragile legitimacy has been conditional on the economic benefits they have offered their followers.

Finally, a neoclassical analysis based on the work of Douglass North and others in the New Institutional tradition suggests that the problem of instability in Bangladesh may

be due to the absence of strong collective identities at the grass roots level (A. A. Khan 1996). The distance of eastern Bengal from invading armies from western India and the easy availability of flood-plain irrigation are some of the characteristics explaining weak collective action in village Bengal. The instability we observe today is explained in terms of this history. Once again, this type of analysis identifies some characteristics of Bangladesh's social organization that are real enough. But the neoclassical approach does not explain why class-based identities continue to remain weak even though the payoffs for solving collective action problems are now very large. More importantly, it does not explain why alternative forms of collective action, particularly in the destructive form of factional politics are so deep-rooted. It is not that all collective action is absent since collective action of some types is deeply entrenched.

The approach in this essay combines the class analysis of the Marxist approaches with an analysis of why in the specific class context of Bangladesh a particular type of patron-client activity predominates. An explanatory framework based entirely on class or one based entirely on patron-client networks misses the interdependence between class interests, primitive accumulation and patron-client networks which we need to explore. It is possible to explain the rapid changes in the ideological orientation of the leading political parties and leaders in Bangladesh in terms of material interests but only if we understand how these material interests have been refracted through the redistributive interests of factions. At the same time, the dominance of factional interests has to be explained with reference to specific processes of class transition going on in the broader society. This transition is one of state-led primitive accumulation that has generated intense political competition for control of the state. This in turn has created irresistible short-term incentives for upwardly mobile groups to collectively organize into competing factions. The leaders of factions have been

able to play a pivotal role in the economic process precisely because primitive accumulation and politically determined surplus allocation has placed a high premium on groups or individuals with superior organizational abilities. The dominance of factional organizations can make sense in such a class context. Factional competition can, in turn, help to explain the rapid and frequent shifts in the ideological affiliations of the ruling coalitions. This is not to deny that strongly-felt values and notions of identity do motivate individuals in society. However, if parties were mainly responding to deeply felt political values, it would be hard to explain the swings in support for competing parties and even more so, the continuous swings in the professed values of political leaders and their supporters.

The rest of the paper is divided into the following sections. Section 1 provides an outline of the cycles in the ideological orientation of the ruling groups in Bangladesh. The shifts in orientation have occurred both at the level of parties and factions, but more dramatically, also at the level of individuals who have frequently changed their positions. This brief description identifies our problem. Section 2 looks at some of the features of party and factional organization and the role of the intermediate classes in providing leadership in this factional competition. Finally, Section 3 argues that the factional conflicts are in fact deeply rooted in processes of primitive accumulation. We argue that this creates strong incentives for a specific type of patron-client competition that can explain political instability and the dynamics behind the changes in nationalist ideologies observed in Bangladesh. This factional competition also has serious implications for economic performance, which we briefly touch on.

## **1. Nationalist Ideologies and Politics in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh was carved out in the form of East Pakistan in 1947 as the outcome of a communal polarization in Bengal. The growth of communal politics in Bengal

happened relatively late but progressed very rapidly. It was several decades after modern political activities began in the early part of the twentieth century that both Hindu and Muslim political communities moved towards communal politics. Bengali Muslim politicians who had previously been organized in secular parties representing the emerging rich peasants of East Bengal began to ally themselves with the Muslim League in the mid-forties even though the Muslim League had never had a strong base in Bengal. At the same time the Bengal Congress which mobilized the predominantly Hindu middle class but also Hindu landlords and peasants became increasingly communal. The communal polarization of Bengal politics in the forties thus affected both communities and marked a sharp break with the secular politics of the early twentieth century. The rapid rise of the Muslim League culminated in its spectacular victory in the 1946 Bengal provincial elections. The League won 108 of the 117 Muslim seats; in no other Muslim majority province was its victory so complete (Hashmi 1994; Kabir, M.G. 1995: 30-121).

However, the disappearance of the Muslim League from East Bengal politics was equally rapid and dramatic. In 1949, barely two years after independence, Maulana Bhashani split the Muslim League by forming the Awami (People's) Muslim League. Ironically, although one of its main aims was to get Bengali recognized as a state language, the word Awami in its title was Urdu and not Bengali. Nevertheless, by the mid-fifties some of the *same* mainstream East Bengali politicians (like Suhrawardy) who had played a key role in the creation of Pakistan turned on their recent allies and began to assert a Bengali nationalist identity for East Pakistan. Indeed, a great many politicians who had till very recently been communal discovered that they were really secular. Under the leadership of Suhrawardy (Sheikh Mujib was still a minor player at that time) the Awami League and its allies wiped the Muslim League off the map in the 1954 elections. What is interesting is that the Awami League, which played a

central role in the breakup of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, was a direct offshoot of the Muslim League that created Pakistan in 1947 (M. G. Kabir 1995: 122-182; Jahan 1994).

However, the post-1971 experience is even more persuasive in forcing us to examine the roots of identity formation more seriously. Prior to 1971, it was possible to argue that the political instability in the country was driven by a search for national identity or by classes using national ideologies in their struggle against exploitation. We do not need to deny the importance of these factors to question whether they provide a *sufficient* explanation for the conflicts and crises of the past fifty years. If they did, the creation of Bangladesh through a truly decisive victory in 1971 for the side that stood for Bengali nationalism should have made an observable difference to political stability. But in fact, as soon as Bangladesh was created, the secular nationalism of the Awami League proved to be incapable of holding together the competing groups of Bengali politicians. Mujib himself did very little to institutionalize secularism, perhaps because he understood the dynamics of Bengali politics quite well. He and many others in his party re-discovered their Islamic roots and tried to outflank their opponents within the party by encouraging the defeated “Islamic” political forces while clamping down on the left.

The history of the economic chaos under the Mujib regime, the growth in authoritarianism as the *Bongobondhu* constructed the apparatus of personal rule, and his eventual assassination by army officers (many of whom were ironically freedom fighters in the 1971 war) remains both painful and controversial in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the attempt by many who are sympathetic to the secular ideals of his party to explain his fall as a conspiracy supported by foreign “anti-liberation” forces is too simplistic. For one thing, it ignores the fact that many of his assassins and their

supporters were freedom fighters who felt that Mujib had betrayed them. Secondly, the political parties which eventually emerged from the military regimes which succeeded Mujib continue to get significant numbers of votes, collectively at least as much as the secular parties. Most importantly, the conspiracy explanations ignore Mujib's own political manoeuvring that showed a high degree of flexibility in terms of his commitment to secularism.

A few examples of this flexibility will have to suffice. Perhaps the most significant act was Mujib's decision in 1973 to release without trial or investigation the 33,000 alleged war criminals who sympathized with, or were members of, Islamist parties. Shortly afterwards, in 1974, Mujib travelled to Pakistan to attend the Islamic Summit held at Lahore and returned home proudly proclaiming Bangladesh to be the world's second largest Islamic nation (Kabir, B.M. 1988: 83-84). In the same year a Madrasah Education Commission was formed to advise on how religious education could be improved. In 1975 Mujib set up the Islamic Foundation to promote Islamic studies and to manage mosques (Murshid 1996: 362-3; Kabir, M.G. 1995: 188-190). Even in terms of the narrow definition of secularism in the new constitution, some of these moves, at least, were suspect.

The Awami League's defence of Islamic sensibilities was exemplified by the Daud Haidar case of 1974. Daud Haidar was a poet who wrote a poem that was deemed blasphemous. The Awami League participated in identifying him as an atheist and communist and he was forced to leave the country. Bhuiyan Monowar Kabir has provided a district-level account of the Pabna Awami League organization leading the mobilization against Daud Haidar in alliance with the recently pardoned Jamaat supporters in a bid to isolate the "left" factions in local politics (Kabir, B.M. 1988: 85).

Whether Mujib and the Awami League were right or wrong to do these things is not our question. We only wish to contrast Mujib's conciliatory stance towards the groups who supported an Islamic identity so soon after a bloody conflict against them with his stance towards groups within his own ostensibly socialist party who were increasingly identifying themselves as the "left". While the general pardon of November 1973 was being implemented to release "Islamist" supporters from prison, no supporter of a left-wing party, of whom many thousands were in prison at that time, was released. We can conclude that Mujib and his supporters did not feel that the practice of Islam damaged the economic interests that they represented. Since the ostensibly secular Awami League had recently won a decisive victory, it would not have sacrificed its interests so readily if there really was a material conflict of interest with Islam.

To clarify what we mean by this, it will be useful to contrast the secularism of the Awami League with the mobilization against the Catholic Church during Europe's Reformation. The conflict between the Church and secular social forces during the Reformation is rightly recognized as one of the defining moments in Europe's transition to modernity. But in Europe, the Church was blocking the material interests of the classes that would lead the industrial revolution. This probably explains why their opposition was implacable until the church had been significantly reformed (Tawney 1938 is still an excellent analysis of this conflict).

The specific features of the Reformation differed from country to country in Western Europe but some broad features were shared in common. Productive capitalist classes were emerging based on long-distance trade, and at the same time, states were being constructed that could exercise territorial jurisdictions within which capitalism could

grow. The declining social forces were those based on landed property, the wealth of the Church and the political ambitions of a Church-based empire. They constituted a social coalition opposed to these changes. As a result, there were relatively sharp economic conflicts between monarchs, the Church and emerging capitalists over their material interests that put the Church on one side and a collection of progressive economic forces on the other.

The most obvious economic conflict between reforming monarchs and the Church was over the vast amounts of land owned by the Church. These assets not only reduced the access of the monarch to revenues but also created a powerful competing political force, often allied to Rome, which could prevent the centralization of political authority in the state. Secondly, there was a conflict between merchants and the Church over the theological acceptability of income from usury in Christianity. Here capitalist accumulation which was driving productivity growth faced obstacles from a pre-capitalist Church-based system of maintaining social order using notions of justice which were no longer appropriate. Finally, there was a conflict between Church and state over their respective jurisdictions when it came to appoint officers to lucrative administrative and judicial positions. In this case too, territorially defined emerging modern states faced competition from a parallel set of jurisdictions organized around the Church. Thus the economic interests underlying the ideological conflict between Church and secular social forces were based on radically different ways of organizing production. This is why religion and secularism represented conflicting class interests in Reformation Europe. This in turn ensured that the victory of one side or the other would have economic consequences for the mode of organizing production in Western Europe over a period of several centuries.

The emerging economic supremacy of the secular interests that challenged the Church

during the Reformation resulted in accelerated economic growth and this ensured that political *practice* eventually became more or less secular across Western Europe. This is despite the fact that in many European countries, including England, the formal constitutional separation of Church and state has not emerged to this day. The Western European story is important because the theoretical association of secular movements with the liberal bourgeoisie and therefore with social progress is based on a reading of this history.

The political economy of religion in contemporary developing countries is somewhat different. In the Indian subcontinent neither Hinduism nor Islam had an organized church with massive land-holdings along the European pattern either in pre-colonial or colonial times, or indeed subsequently. Nor has there been any ongoing competition between “church” and state over their respective jurisdictions in appointing office-holders along the European pattern. The weakness of religious control meant that rules about usury could be ignored altogether, or evaded through profit-sharing as in contemporary Pakistan. This meant that the restrictions on usury in Islam did not lead to intense conflicts between emerging merchant-financiers and the “church”. In independent Pakistan or Bangladesh, the merchant and capitalist classes have certainly not felt threatened by the anti-capitalism implicit in the Islamic ban on usury. Similarly, while some aspects of Hinduism, such as the caste system, appear to be anti-capitalist, emerging Hindu traders and capitalists have not felt threatened by these and have certainly not been in the forefront of secular movements in India.

Mujib's flexibility in the early seventies is easier to comprehend if we recognize that the Awami League and its opponents were in fact mobilizing groups within the same set of classes for whom the *practice* of Islam or secularism did not have a direct

material significance. Nevertheless the regime's choices did have an economic significance in the sense that the ruling coalition was searching for allies at the lowest cost. We can see a materialist logic in these concessions in terms of Mujib's search for a critical minimum group to sustain his hold on power. In the aftermath of independence, it was cheaper for the ruling group to acquire allies from amongst the defeated Islamist groups rather than from within the left. The left was growing in mobilizing ability, and its leaders could therefore have demanded much bigger payoffs for their allegiance.

If Mujib had feared that his faction might begin to fracture, he was certainly right. Bengali politicians who had just months ago been united in their allegiance to Bengali nationalism now began to divide on other issues. A large group left the Awami League under the banner of socialism to set up a new socialist party. The socialist credentials of the new *Jatiyo Shomajtantrik Dol* (JSD) were, however, fairly suspect given that a number of their key leaders later joined military governments. The breakdown of unity within the ruling group was so precipitous, and the effects so destructive for the economy, that Mujib responded with draconian but ultimately futile measures. He relied increasingly on a para-military force answerable directly to him (the *Jatiyo Rokkhi Bahini* or JRB), amended the constitution to introduce a presidential form of government, and finally instituted a one-party state. Despite these measures political stability collapsed, crime and violence soared, and partly as a consequence, the state was unable to respond (and was certainly perceived to have failed to respond) to the famine of 1974-5 in a satisfactory manner. This was the prelude to Mujib's assassination and military rule.

Mujib's assassination in 1975 was followed by two decades of governments which tried to construct a new political unity around the notion of a *Bangladeshi*, for which

read Bengali Muslim, identity for the nation. The military governments, which succeeded Mujib, and the civilian parties they created, were also full of paradoxes. They absorbed many defectors from the Awami League, who saw no contradiction in adopting the new Bangladeshi identity, and they also attracted old Maoists like Kazi Zafar and JSD socialists like Abdur Rab who argued that the developmental agenda of the military was more in tune with socialism. Constitutional changes were introduced which recognized the privileged status of Islam but they stopped short of declaring Bangladesh an Islamic Republic. The secular agenda, to the extent that it was ever implemented, was correspondingly attenuated. Yet no stability was to emerge.

By the end of the eighties the main lines of ideological conflict were drawn between the *Bangladeshi* nationalist BNP (the Bangladesh Nationalist Party set up by General Zia) and the *Bengali* nationalist Awami League. Yet, the two joined forces in the late eighties in their fight against the ruling Jatiyo Party of Ershad that was ideologically indistinguishable from the BNP. In the early nineties, an even more unholy alliance emerged between the secular Awami League and the Islamist Jamaat against the then-ruling BNP government. Inevitably, over this period the Awami League's secular claims became much more muted. By this stage it had become difficult to identify any important issues of concrete political practice affecting secularism on which the three major parties actually differed. Compare, for instance, the very similar record of BNP and Awami League governments in the nineties in banning books offending Islamic sensibilities.

Despite the convergence in practice, the conflict between the *Bengali* nationalism of the Awami League and the *Bangladeshi* nationalism of their rivals has emerged as a new focus of ideological differentiation and conflict. The rather obscure distinction between the two is in itself interesting. *Bengali* nationalism is supposed to be the

nationalism of the Bengali people, and *Bangladeshi* nationalism, the nationalism of the Bangladeshi people. A substantial number of Bengalis live in the Indian state of West Bengal and most of them are not Muslims. Bengali nationalism stresses the shared linguistic culture of the two Bengals. On the other hand, Bangladeshi nationalism celebrates the Muslim-Bengali culture of East Bengal and points out the specifically Islamic practices that define social life in Bangladesh. Since this is a political dispute, we are entitled to ask what the political implications of the two nationalist philosophies are.

Historically, political conflicts between competing traditions of nationalism have been conflicts over the boundaries of the nation-state. One might have thought that Bengali nationalism, appealing to Bengalis as a whole, would challenge the existing borders of both India and Bangladesh. If it did, there would indeed be a significant difference in the political implications of the two ideologies. But in fact, the supporters of Bengali nationalism in Bangladesh, and in particular the Awami League, have no intention of forming or joining an actual nation-state with the West Bengalis. Thus, in terms of the implications for sovereignty or the boundaries of the state, the nationalist debate in Bangladesh is of no consequence. It is as if Chinese nationalists in Taiwan ruled out unification with China but yet wanted to distinguish themselves from Taiwanese nationalists. Instead the object in the Bangladeshi conflict now seems to be to mobilize mutually exclusive groups who can only be differentiated according to their professed *cultural* preferences (which occasionally change). This latest phase in the conflict over nationalism in Bangladesh is important because it is no longer possible to sustain the argument that fundamental questions of sovereignty are driving the ideological debate. On the contrary, the political process seems to be keeping alive an issue that has ceased to have any meaning for most people.

Why do obscure debates about the *culture* of the country get misrepresented as conflicts over *nationalism* and manage to dominate conflicts in the political arena? Clearly there are passionately felt differences between Bangladeshis about how they would like to see themselves but these preferences do not have material implications for most people nor do they have political implications for sovereignty. At most, the competing nationalisms may have implications for the degree to which secularism is observed, but even here, the practice of the competing parties shows little substantial difference. All this suggests that taking the substance of the political disputes too seriously, whether secularism or nationalism, may be missing the point. There are clearly deep economic conflicts, and ideology plays a part in defining the competing parties, but the disputes are not really over the ideologies. Rather, the logic behind defining and re-defining one's "nationalist" camp seems to be to contest the ruling coalition if one is in opposition, or to sustain the ruling coalition at least cost, if one is in power.

## **2. Parties, Factions and the Intermediate Classes**

A number of features of the political competition in Bangladesh can help to explain the rapidly changing but sustained ideological conflicts described in the last section. Most observers will readily recognize these features, but to establish them as typical would require a much fuller historical and sociological discussion than we will attempt. Instead, we will only point out two key features that we believe are important. First, we note that political parties are multi-class organizations that bring together a large number of patron-client networks in a pyramidal structure. Secondly, members of the "intermediate" classes dominate the organizational leadership of these factions. The implications of these characteristics are discussed in the next section.

The observation that political parties in Bangladesh are multi-class factional

organizations is not in itself controversial in terms of the descriptions found in the Bangladeshi literature. It is widely noted, for instance, that the major parties in Bangladesh represent quite similar multi-class interests, that they routinely split and re-form along factions led by strong personalities, and that these factions are themselves loose coalitions of smaller or primary factions which are to be found at all levels of society (see, for instance, Khan, Islam & Haque 1996; S.A. Khan 1989; Siddiqui 1984; Riaz 1994; Wood 1994: 31-99). But recognizing this process raises an obvious question that deserves analytical attention. Why is it that formal organized politics has been dominated by the conflicts between these multi-class patron-client factions rather than by the conflict between classes which clearly also exist?

Looking from the bottom up, the basic component of any party or coalition, however large, is a myriad of basic patron-client factions. Each of these is organized around a single or small group of leaders. These basic patron-client factions are ubiquitous and range from neighbourhood groups led by petty mafia bosses known in Bangladesh as *mastans* to village factions led by somewhat more respectable *matabbars*, *dalals* and *upazilla* chairmen. Looking from the top down, factions at lower levels are too small to wield any real bargaining power vis-a-vis factions organized at higher levels or vis-a-vis the state. Bargaining power depends on the number of people who can be occasionally mobilized by the faction for elections but more generally for maintaining local level enforcement networks, organizing civil protests, demonstrations, enforcing general strikes, and other forms of activity which aim to inflict costs on those who refuse to make deals or offer payoffs to that faction.

Since bargaining power is greater when the faction is bigger, there is a strong incentive for coalitions of factions to start coalescing in a pyramidal fashion. The more serious the conflict, the bigger the coalition that will form to fight it, with the

payoffs from victory being distributed in varying proportions down the pyramid. Higher-level faction leaders deal with lower level faction leaders, adding or removing them as conditions change. At the same time, lower level faction leaders join or exit from the coalition depending on what they are being offered by the coalition compared to others. The leader of the Awami League, for instance, is the leader of a relatively small number of factions at the highest level, but if we follow each of these factions down the pyramid, a vast number of factions will be found at the lowest levels.

The ubiquity and often vagueness of the notion of the faction in the Indian subcontinent has led some to question its usefulness (Hardiman 1982). Interestingly, the Bengali word for faction, *dol*, is the same word that now means party. But is Hardiman right to question all analysis that focuses on the faction? First, he argues that not all political leaders operate through factions. Some are activists who directly engage in agitational (for which we can read class) politics. The existence of such exceptional individuals does not, of course, preclude the usefulness of the notion of faction if we observe, as we do, that many important political issues are contested between factions.

A second critique is that higher-level leaders are often observed to fail in forcing their decisions on lower level clients. This too does not rule out the importance of factions, it simply says that the bargaining power between patrons and clients within factions can vary greatly. Not only is this true, the rapid formation and dissolution of big coalitions testifies to the ability of lower level clients to opt out of the coalition as conditions change or as better offers are made by competing coalitions.

A more significant criticism offered by Hardiman is that clients often have strong

class organizations of their own which can over-ride their loyalties to their patrons. This criticism is really directed against those who present faction and class as mutually exclusive categories such that collective action is only of one type or the other. Hardiman's critique of factional analysis that ignores class entirely is totally justified. But individuals can and do operate within both class and factional organizations, we have to explain why the most important political battles in the past century have been between factional organizations.

Finally, Hardiman points out that there is little evidence of factions operating at the national level with tentacles spreading right down to the village. He reviews the classic works on factions by F.G. Bailey, Ralph Nicholas and Paul Brass amongst others to show that their work does not support the claim that the day-to-day operation of village factions is dominated by loyalty to patrons outside the village. This criticism is levelled against an anthropological notion of faction based on loyalty. If factions were indeed based on loyalty networks then a faction once established would be fairly immutable and we would see traces of its existence even when no immediate conflicts were going on. However, we would argue that most factions and factional alliances are rationally made pragmatic alliances based on what the lower level faction can offer the higher level one and vice versa. The coalition that would form during an election would be different from the coalition that would form during a land dispute.

Shakeeb Adnan Khan (1989) provides an account of the operation of village-level factions in Bangladesh from a Marxist perspective. He describes in rich detail how patron-client factions compete vigorously at the village level for access to state distributed resources like irrigation pumps or Food for Works contracts, or to settle land disputes where mobilizations of rival forces by the contestants plays a critical

role. Successful patrons not only have to be more successful in organizing locally, they also have to be successful in forging flexible alignments with parties and factions at higher levels controlling the state. The clients of village patrons, the small and middle peasants who benefit from the resources which village-level patrons can distribute, are not only *not* perturbed by their patrons changing their party allegiances as power shifts in Dhaka, they *expect* them to do so (S.A. Khan 1989: 91-125). Thus here too, Hardiman's critique is relevant but only when directed against analysts for whom factions are based on pre-rational loyalties to caste or kin. Such factions are very rare, and as we have seen, coalitions which are constructed on the basis of apparently primordial loyalties such as religion rapidly break down once their immediate objectives have been achieved. The experience of caste-based coalitions in India has been very similar.

The second point which is worthy of note is that not only are factions ubiquitous, they are organized and led by political organizers who typically come from the “intermediate” classes. Factions are very rarely *led* by capitalists and almost never by workers, the landless or poor peasants. Classes that occupy an intermediate position in society, often collectively described as the intermediate classes, dominate factional leadership positions. The term was popularized by Kalecki (1972) who noted that the urban petty bourgeoisie, rich peasants and state bureaucrats politically dominated post-independence India. Our use of the term differs somewhat from Kalecki. We include a broader group of classes in the category, which we treat as a residual to describe classes that are not capitalist, working class (including the unemployed) or poor peasant (who are at, or close to, subsistence levels). Nor do we want to say, like Kalecki, that these classes have some shared interest in non-capitalist development that the *intermediate regime* promotes. Rather, our intention in identifying these classes is simply to point out that the polar classes do not dominate organizational

politics. On the other hand, the intermediate classes too do not act as classes. They simply provide tens of thousands of recruits for leading and organizing factional politics at different levels of society. The economic policies the state follows cannot simply be read off from this fact, and here we differ from Kalecki. The tension between the redistributive demands coming from factional politics and the imperative of ensuring economic growth largely through the capitalist sector has resulted in sharp shifts in state policy. The state has sometimes followed dramatically pro-capitalist policies, and at other times (as in the early seventies) it has almost destroyed capitalism (see M.H. Khan 1989; 1999).

Our broader definition of the intermediate classes includes rich peasants, middle peasants, the urban petty-bourgeoisie and the educated “middle class”, both employed professionals and the educated unemployed. While these classes have different interests, it is not surprising that they should have collectively provided a significant proportion of the political entrepreneurs of recent history. Compared to workers, poor peasants and the illiterate unemployed, they have a relatively high degree of organizational ability based on their *relatively* high levels of education and wealth. Secondly, though still a relatively small fraction of the population, they are far more numerous than capitalists and large landlords whose numbers are insignificant in developing countries like Bangladesh, and who therefore do not play a central organizational role in politics. Nor is capitalism so developed that the capitalist class can dominate politics indirectly by exercising their purchasing power. The important point is that while political entrepreneurs *from* the intermediate classes play a key role in political organization, it is not the case that the intermediate classes dominate the political scene *as classes*.

Thus the political dominance of the intermediate classes reflects the incomplete

transition to capitalism. Bangladesh suffers from this incomplete transition to a higher degree than many other parts of the Indian subcontinent. Industrial capitalism was virtually non-existent in Eastern Bengal in the colonial period. Nevertheless, the growth of administrative employment, the professions and the prospect of political liberalization in the late colonial period opened up growing factional conflicts led by the intermediate classes. Rich and middle peasants in East Bengal had enjoyed a period of prosperity based on commercial agriculture in the first three decades of the twentieth century and provided political leaders for the contest over the state apparatus. The prize was the control over state sector jobs and resources and this was the beginning of the first of the mass mobilizations we came across in the last section (Chatterjee 1982; Goswami 1982).

The disposition of classes in contemporary Bangladesh demonstrates the continuing importance of the intermediate classes. Most of Bangladesh still lives in rural areas even though the share actually employed in agriculture has been rapidly falling. Even in 1970, the share of the population in urban areas was only 6%, rising to around 20% in the late nineties (Hossain 1996: Table 3.1). In agriculture, even though accumulation and growth of the market economy have generated tendencies towards land concentration in some areas, these have not been strong enough to over-ride countervailing tendencies. First, there has been a dramatic population explosion in the second half of the twentieth century with the population increasing from around 40 million in 1950 to more than 120 million today. Muslim inheritance laws ensured substantial land fragmentation as a result. Secondly, investment in politics has often been more attractive than investment in land and indeed necessary to protect land already owned. As a result, the rural rich have often invested in politics rather than in land beyond a point (S.A. Khan 1989: esp. 114-125).

Table 1 summarizes recent trends in landholding patterns. Economic differentiation and rapid population growth contributed to a rapid increase in landlessness till currently around 50% of rural households are functionally landless. Very similar pressures have also resulted in a dramatic growth in relatively small farms that have grown both in relative numbers and in terms of the share of total land they account for. The middle peasant category is relatively stable in importance. The total amount of land they control has not dramatically fallen, even though in *relative* terms, the number of farms in this category has declined. Large farms (which in Bangladesh is anything over 7.5 acres) have not been so successful. The total area controlled by large farms has declined (H.Z. Rahman 1998: 68-71). In fact, *most* large and middle farms in Bangladesh are really relatively small peasant farms by global standards, and their owners are in most cases members of the intermediate classes rather than capitalist farmers. Even though the landless and the subsistence farmers are numerically dominant, it is these middle and large peasants who dominate rural politics.

Table 1. Landholding Structure and Landlessness in Bangladesh						
CATEGORY	Percentage of Farms			Percentage of Area		
	1977	1983-4	1995	1977	1983-4	1995
Small Farms (-2.5 acres)	49.7	70.3	72.7	18.8	29.0	36.8
Middle Farms (2.5-7.5 acres)	40.9	24.7	23.1	48.9	45.1	43.4
Large Farms (7.5- acres)	9.4	4.9	4.0	32.4	25.9	20.7
Functionally Landless: 0-0.5a (% of Rural Households)		56.0	50.0			
Source: H.Z. Rahman (1998) Tables 4.1 and 4.2						

The numerical dominance of the intermediate classes within the politically significant

urban groups is also clear. An extensive survey of households in Dhaka city in 1985 (Siddiqui et. al. 1990) collected data from 4,500 households, or 1% of the total, based on the records of the Dhaka Municipal Corporation. This does not include illegal properties and slum dwellers and so workers and the unemployed are under-reported. Since we are interested in the classes that can potentially play a leading role in politics, the survey effectively gives us the numerical distribution within these classes.

Table 2 summarizes the occupational structure reported. The preponderance of the intermediate classes can be seen from the first two rows. The first row reports professionals who are clearly part of the intermediate classes. The study does not specify the criterion according to which the household heads describe themselves as large, medium or small businessmen, but it is clear from the study that industrialists are large businessmen (Siddiqui et. al. 1990: 173-192). We conservatively assume that half of the medium businessmen and all the small businessmen are petty-bourgeois, that is shopkeepers, self-employed political entrepreneurs whose “business” is based on licenses to supply controlled commodities, and so on. This means that around two-thirds of registered households belong to the intermediate classes, a proportion which is not surprising in the context of contemporary developing countries.

Table 2. Occupation of Heads of Households in Dhaka City 1985	
OCCUPATION	%
Professions with High and Intermediate Education (Doctors, Teachers, Lawyers, Government and Non-Government Service and Corporations)	43.4
Trade and Commerce	36.7
(Big Business)	(4.9)
(Medium Business)	(20.5)
(Small Business)	(11.3)
Occupations with Low Skills and Education (Rickshaw-pullers, Daily Labourers, Drivers, Technicians)	12.5
With no Employment (including housewives, students and retired)	7.4
Source: Siddiqui et. al. (1990) Table 21.	

The registered households in the formal sector of the economy are often the ones that play a leading role in domestic politics. The pivotal *leadership* role played by the intermediate classes is even more pronounced when we look at the membership of political parties. Khan, Islam and Haque (1996) provide a survey of 355 political leaders carried out in 1990/91. They surveyed leaders at different levels of political parties across the entire range of the political spectrum. Of the respondents, 63% reported an income less than 10,000 taka (around 200 dollars) and almost 90% had an income less than 20,000 taka (400 dollars) a month (Khan, Islam & Haque 1996: Table 5.12). Even by the standards of the Bangladeshi capitalists and upper middle class professionals, these are low incomes. In terms of their own class description, 66% described themselves as lower-middle class, 33% as middle class, and only 1% as upper class (Table 5.17).

Taken as a whole, this evidence suggests that in contrast to Bardhan's model for India

(Bardhan 1984), the political competition over resources in Bangladesh (and, we would argue, in India too) is not organized primarily between industrial capitalists, professionals and landlords organized *as classes*, but rather between competing multi-class factions led at each level by political entrepreneurs from the “intermediate classes”. Far from rejecting the importance of class, we would argue that it is important to explain why members of different classes actually behave in this way.

### **3. Primitive Accumulation and the Intermediate Classes**

The dominance of intermediate class leaders and the prevalence of factional politics do not by themselves explain political instability or the ideological conflicts that we have outlined earlier. To proceed further, we have to look at the nature of “primitive accumulation” in countries like Bangladesh and the distributive conflicts unleashed by this process. Primitive accumulation is accumulation which is not based on capitalist production but which is essential for the capitalist transition since it provides the initial resources for the creation of capitalist property and for setting up capitalist enterprises. Essentially, it describes the transfer of resources from non-capitalist to capitalist sectors. In the context of the transition to capitalism in England, primitive accumulation involved theft, the enclosure of common lands, colonial plunder, unequal exchange, the protection of markets and the fiscal mechanism (Marx 1979: 873-940). The role of the state can be critical during this period because all these processes “employ the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, as in a hothouse, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition” (Marx 1979: 915-16).

Irfan Habib pointed out that primitive accumulation can be a protracted process and moreover, it does not necessarily lead to a successful capitalist transition. For

instance, the primitive accumulation organized by the British in India created a proletarian class by destroying handicrafts but did not create a significant Indian capitalism because the resources appropriated were largely invested in Britain (Habib 1995: 271-295). While today a capitalist sector exists in pockets all over the Indian subcontinent, processes that are very similar to the primitive accumulation described by Marx still continue, though in modern variants.

If we look at Bangladesh, the viability of the emerging capitalist sector in industry has been critically dependent on state-organized transfers of resources from consumers and non-capitalist sectors through taxes, exchange rates and tariffs protecting emerging industries (Norbye 1990; M.H. Khan 1989; 1999). In addition, vast amounts of public resources have been channelled to emerging “capitalists” as loans from state-owned banks. These loans funded almost the entire investment in large-scale industry in the seventies and eighties. The immediate source of these resources was international capitalism, since the state-owned banks in turn borrowed from bilateral and multilateral agencies. But to the extent that the loans will eventually be called, and most of the “capitalists” have no intention of repaying (see Sobhan 1991 for estimates of the “debt default”), they amount to a transfer from taxpayers and consumers in non-capitalist sectors. Other mechanisms which have been important in the past have included overvalued exchange rates which notoriously transferred resources from jute-growing East Pakistani peasants to emerging industrialists in West Pakistan.

Whether we want to call these processes primitive accumulation or give them a new name is not important. What is important is that there are analytical similarities between these modern processes and the enclosures and colonial plunder involved in earlier transitions. The modern processes are somewhat less violent and more

sophisticated fiscal and financial mechanisms are involved. But as before, the growth of capitalism is linked to *redistributive* transfers of resources from other sectors. Secondly, as before, contemporary primitive accumulation does not *have* to result in successful capitalist transitions. In the case of Bangladesh, certainly, much of the transfers have been wasted and a vigorous capitalism is yet to emerge. There are many other conditions that are necessary for capitalist transitions to be successful. The Brenner debates pointed out the importance of pre-existing class structures in the transitions in Europe (Aston & Philpin 1987). Khan & Jomo (2000) discuss some of the features of successful and unsuccessful transitions in a comparative Asian perspective.

The role of factional politics and of patron-client networks in developing countries have to be understood in this context. Since the capitalist sector by definition does not yet dominate the economy, it is not surprising that explicitly pro-capitalist parties do not dominate politics. As a result, redistributions to emerging capitalists (whether or not they eventually turn out to be productive) are typically only a small part of the overall redistributions taking place in society. If redistributions were limited to emerging capitalists alone, there would undoubtedly be substantial political opposition. This should not be interpreted in a functionalist sense to imply that redistribution to non-capitalist factions take place to purchase political stability for capitalist primitive accumulation. Rather, emerging capitalists and non-capitalist political entrepreneurs jointly compete for resources through their factions. Some of the most successful political entrepreneurs may themselves make a transition to trade and industry, or they may divert resources to industrialists in exchange for kickbacks.

It is easy to see why emerging capitalists cannot seize state power to organize redistribution to themselves alone. Big businessmen in urban areas are less than 5% of

the politically significant urban households (see Table 2). Moreover, only a very small part of *these* households are actually large industrialists. The number of significant industrialists who have benefited from state-sponsored primitive accumulation probably numbers in the hundreds at most. This is a minuscule proportion of registered urban households. Similarly, in rural areas, the landowners who are direct beneficiaries of state policies in the form of getting loans for tube-wells, or lucrative construction contracts, or licenses to distribute controlled commodities are inevitably a minuscule proportion of the huge number of peasant households in the rich to middle categories (Table 1).

On the other hand, the size of the intermediate classes also precludes social-democratic transfers to the intermediate classes collectively. In a very poor country, if 30 to 40% of the population who belong to the intermediate classes have to be accommodated with significant transfers, this would present impossible fiscal burdens. Thus even when populist parties have controlled the state, policies of redistribution to the intermediate classes as a whole have not been tried. The transfers we observe are not to the intermediate classes as a whole but to factions that succeed in winning particular political contests. The accumulation strategies of upwardly mobile members of the intermediate classes, and indeed some of the shifts in their ideological positions can be better understood in this context.

If we remember that the main characteristic of the period of primitive accumulation is the contestability of property rights and state-sponsored redistributions of resources, it is possible to make materialist sense of the persistence of some types of factional politics in countries where the intermediate classes dominate. There are tremendous incentives for capitalists and non-capitalists alike to belong to political groupings that can capture or protect assets, licenses, subsidies, jobs, and indeed any valuable

resource. Since organizational ability is the key and there is a vast pool of intermediate classes providing this ability, there is a proliferation of groups at all levels engaged in the creation and resolution of conflict.

Success in redistributive contests depends on each faction being able to field more organizational power than its rivals. This is as true of the lowest level factions fighting over disputed land in villages as of national level factions competing for control of the state. The national factions are, of course, constructed out of primary factions. If they are successful, members of the intermediate classes in leadership positions at different levels of the faction can become quite well off and may make a transition to the asset owning class. These payoffs for the faction can take the form of licenses, loans from state banks, and the control over local state organs such as the police that allows land grabbing or jobs in public sector enterprises, to give just a few examples.

The ability of any particular primary faction to get included at any level of the much bigger factions competing for state power depends on its perceived ability to deliver organizational power at least cost for the higher leadership. The organizational power of a faction depends on its ability to field its supporters, from mobilizing them for local elections to bringing them out to impose costs on opponents, in many cases through organized violence. At each level including the highest, leaders want to have the maximum number of the most powerful factions under them, but not without limit, because the more factions they incorporate, the more thinly will they have to distribute the resources they eventually hope to capture. This ensures that factions never become truly encompassing, and when they do become too big they start to rapidly fragment.

Primary factions can be excluded if the leadership of a higher level faction feels that the economic cost of including it is too high for achieving its redistributive agenda or, (if the higher level faction already has access to resources), the political cost of excluding the lower level group is acceptable. The strategy of excluded groups in turn is to shift their political positions from being simply troublesome to being totally incompatible with that of the ruling group depending on their assessment of whether accommodation is still possible or not. Sooner or later cracks also start appearing within the ruling coalition as some factions within the ruling coalition feel they are not getting their just deserts. These factions may start to leave the ruling group to join opposition coalitions and eventually the ruling coalition becomes unviable and is replaced.

The sequence of such calculations results in a fairly systematic pattern at the national level over time. A national party that does not have access to state power seeks to attract primary factions to challenge the party in power. It does this by creating as much disruption as possible for the group that is currently in power to signal to unattached factions that it is a serious contestant. The purpose of this opposition is to achieve either incorporation by being offered an acceptable payoff or the overthrow of the party in power. At the same time, the faction in power seeks to stabilize its rule by forming a big enough coalition that incorporates some of the most troublesome groups and factions at least cost. The leaders of the party in power have to be skilful in shifting the focal point defining their ideological position to accommodate as many of the target groups as possible while differentiating itself from its opponents. The longer they can succeed in doing this, the longer they will survive and continue to benefit from direct access to political power which is critical for appropriating or protecting resources.

In reality there *are* small differences in the balance of classes that the different factions incorporate. Nevertheless it is surprising how much of the recent political and ideological conflicts can be explained simply in terms of redistributive conflicts between patron-client factions. We have seen for instance, that Mujib and the “left” united against the military regime in Pakistan in the late sixties, but the same Mujib decided to bypass the left and make overtures to the “right” in the early seventies. These moves are difficult to interpret if we associate secularism with class interests or even with strongly felt ideological commitments of the leadership. However, from a factional perspective, Mujib's moves make sense because his later concessions were precisely to those groups that could at most demand limited payoffs for the support they could offer. In contrast, concessions to factions that identified with left-wing symbols were increasingly more expensive as more and more factions re-aligned to the new focal point provided by the “socialist challenge” to the Awami League.

There is, however, an important paradox that we must address. Why do the masses persistently collude in being “fooled” since this pattern of politics has been around long enough for everybody to realize what is going on? Even though the intermediate classes dominate in leadership positions, parties can only succeed if they can bring out mass support at critical times and, of course, at elections. The mass supporters of parties do not in the end get substantial economic payoffs or payoffs in the form of their preferred ideological positions being realized. Nevertheless there seems to be a widespread collusion in the acceptance of the meaningfulness of the claims made by parties, and alternative movements or parties that could in theory reflect mass aspirations better do not replace them. Two types of answer have been provided. The first comes from a narrowly defined class analysis and the second from a neo-Weberian analysis of the patrimonial state, but neither is satisfactory on its own.

The conventional class approach, exemplified in Bangladesh by the work of Badruddin Umar (1980a; 1980b) identifies class conflicts between conventional classes such as capitalists, landlords, workers and peasants as the key determinants of the underlying conflicts over resources. Hashmi (1994) and Rahman and Azad (1990) are other examples. These approaches point out that in the 1940s, the most important class conflict in Bengal was between the mainly Muslim peasantry and the mainly Hindu *zamindars* who were large absentee “landlords” who effectively only had residual rent collecting powers. In addition to the *zamindar* versus peasant conflict in Bengal, there were a number of secondary conflicts, such as that between the more advanced Hindu bourgeoisie and the emerging Muslim bourgeoisie in Western India, between the Muslim landowning classes of central India and the emerging dominance of the Hindu capitalist class, and finally the conflict between the more advanced Hindu professional middle class and the emerging Muslim middle class all over India. The conflict between the *zamindars* and peasants was undoubtedly the most important conflict for Bengal given the preponderance of the agrarian economy. As late as the 1930s, the salience of this conflict was reflected in the growing ascendance of secular peasant parties such as the *Krishok Proja Party*. But by the 1940s, class politics became communalized under the leadership of the emerging Muslim intermediate classes consisting in the main of rich peasants and urban professionals. These groups established their leadership by representing the class conflict as a communal one, a trick they could play because of the contingent religious composition of the relevant classes.

In effect, authors such as Umar (1980a; 1980b), Hashmi (1994) and others in this category rely on either “false consciousness” or betrayal by the leadership to explain how the genuine grievances of the poor and middle peasants and of urban workers got translated into a political language and agenda which offered them little.

Nevertheless, this agenda did propel the middle classes from within the Muslim community into political power. Similarly, class conflict between Bengali workers and poor peasants and the largely West Pakistan-based industrial capitalists may have been behind the conflicts of the late sixties. While such explanations clearly have a factual description at their core, they are not fully satisfactory for several reasons. First, a false consciousness and/or betrayal explanation may have been convincing for the first mass mobilization of 1947 or even for the second one of 1971. But when we see the same pattern of ideologically based factions led by intermediate classes repeating itself again and again into the eighties and nineties, the false consciousness explanation gets stretched and we have to ask whether it was a sufficient explanation in the first place.

As we noted in the last section, there seems to be a systematic readiness on the part of the poor to accept uncomplicated ideological dichotomies and to readily mobilize along these lines. Is this really based on false consciousness? When anyone has actually bothered to ask the poor about their opinions and beliefs there is very little evidence of false consciousness. Unfortunately, representative surveys do not exist for the earlier periods but increasingly such studies are being conducted to test popular perceptions. Banu (1992) is an example of a nation-wide survey of contemporary attitudes (quoted in Khan, Islam & Haque 1996: 14). In the eighties when the mainstream parties were once again fighting the secular versus Islamic battle, this survey found that only 6.4% of rural respondents were proud of national independence and only 1% of the War of Liberation, the most potent symbols of the commitment to secularism. At the same time, barely 9% of the respondents reported that they were proud of Islam. This hardly suggests the kind of deeply felt primordial commitments that could explain a century of strife. The mass of Bangladesh's working people seem to have little time for the fine ideological debates of the middle

classes, a fact which should hardly be surprising in itself. But it does leave unexplained the ability of parties and factions to mobilize the masses ostensibly on such issues rather than on the basis of the economic interests of the poor.

Instead of false consciousness, it may be that individuals at the bottom of the pyramid behave as they do because what little they can potentially get through the success of their faction is greater than the expected payoffs from class action. The poor do get some benefits from factional politics although the benefits are pitifully small. They may range from the patron's offer of protection through the mobilization of the faction during disputes over land and resources, the offer of credit at less than usurious interest rates, or in the case of more active foot soldiers, a regular retainer. A *rational* rejection of class policies by the poor may be based on a number of considerations. First, there may be a justifiable perception that class action to change society is unlikely to succeed unless a very significant degree of class unity was to emerge. If the poor perceive that they are fragmented, and that the rich and the intermediate classes will most likely succeed in dividing them, then following class politics is irrational. The observed preference of the poor to support factional patrons rather than class organizations (S.A. Khan 1989; Jansen 1987) may then be based not on false consciousness but rather on a rational calculation about which strategy is likely to make any difference in the actual class context in which the poor find themselves.

A more fundamental problem may be that the poor (and indeed their leaders) may not be able to visualize a credible change in the productive system that could make *everyone* who was poor better off. Like fragmentation, the absence of credible strategies to increase the size of the pie through inclusive class politics by the poor is not necessarily an unalterable fact. Nevertheless, in the absence of credible strategies to increase the size of the pie, upward mobility through the political process is a zero-

sum game. There may then be a tradeoff between the size of the group one belongs to and the payoff one gets. More specifically, there may be an “inverse-U-shaped” relationship between the size of the group and the payoff. If the group is too small, its bargaining power is negligible and the payoff it gets is zero. If it is too big, involving for instance all the poor, the payoff is again very small because the payoff has to be widely distributed, given that no convincing programme exists for increasing production through class action. The typical patron-client faction may offer the best payoff to the individual poor person, providing that he or she succeeds in selecting a winning faction. Belonging to a faction and participating in this type of politics may then be attractive given the very limited alternatives as perceived by the poor themselves.

This conclusion is most compelling when we look at contemporary Bangladesh politics when the ideological conflicts have become more and more bizarre from the perspective of the poor but have not failed to attract supporters to the mass parties. But it may also be worth questioning earlier history. For instance, was the conversion of the Bengal peasants to the idea of a “Muslim utopia” in 1946 (as described in Hashmi 1994) really based on false consciousness? Apparently irrational choices (in the sense that they seem to go against the interests of those making them) can actually be rational decisions even when they are collectively self-defeating.

Our materialist analysis of patron-client politics can also explain another apparent paradox. Twice in the last fifty years in East Bengal, massive political victories were followed by the virtually immediate disintegration of the winning party. The Muslim League, which won a landslide in Bengal in 1946, fell apart in East Pakistan in a matter of months and lost the 1954 provincial elections to the secular United Front, never to recover (M. G. Kabir 1995: 122-139). In much the same way, the Awami

League, which won a landslide victory in East Pakistan in 1969, began to disintegrate in Bangladesh within months of independence. The rapid fragmentation of the ruling coalition led to Mujib's disastrous experiment with a one-party state and presidential authoritarianism and eventually to his downfall in 1975 (M. G. Kabir 1995: 183-195).

An important aspect, at least, of this type of political disintegration can be explained in terms of the economic logic of factional competition. The paradox of success is that when an opposition faction is too successful in attracting primary factions to itself, it faces a problem. It can win, but in victory it will not have sufficient resources to satisfy all the aspirants who have joined as faction leaders. In East Bengal in 1947, and then in East Pakistan in 1971, the problem was even more dramatic. The coincidence of communal or ethnic identities with factional ones meant that in 1947 the defeated factions preferred to leave the country and in 1971 they were forced to leave. The object of the opposition in both cases had been to claim some of the resources previously monopolised by the faction in power. Their victory on the basis of a massive coalition combined with the departure of a substantial part of the group from which redistribution could have been claimed proved to be disastrous for the victorious on both occasions.

A materialist explanation of the instability created by factional politics needs to be distinguished from the patron-client analysis in the Weberian tradition. For Weber too, pre-capitalist societies were characterized by variants of patron-client relationships, but for very different reasons. Weber contrasted the “rational” bureaucratic form of governance seen in modern capitalism with *traditional* forms of authority in pre-capitalist societies. Patrimonial rule was identified as one of the most important of these pre-capitalist forms of governance, where allegiance to a leader is based on personal loyalty and traditional legitimacy (Weber 1978: 1006-1110).

Instability in this framework is explained by the importance in patrimonial societies of the “charisma” of the leader. Changes in leadership can then lead to far-reaching changes in social policy as long as the leader remains within the bounds of traditional legitimacy.

While Weber has inspired contemporary sociologists to look for authority exercised through personalized patron-client networks, we would argue that the patron-client networks we observe in the Indian subcontinent are not based on traditional legitimacy. On the contrary, the “contract” between patrons and clients in contemporary developing countries is often surprisingly modern and rational. It is based on an exchange of organizational muscle for material benefits and is readily renegotiated if clients (or indeed entire factions) are offered better terms by other patrons or higher-level factions.

Weber's analysis is also different because of its underlying analysis of the economic implications of patrimonialism. What interests Weber is the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of patrimonial rule, which he contrasts with the formal and predictable nature of bureaucratic rule. Capitalism, he argues, requires the rule-governed predictability of bureaucratic governance. The arbitrariness of patrimonialism stifles capitalism by lowering investment and preventing long-term planning by capitalists and encourages patrimonial rulers to arbitrarily favour their clients by granting them monopolies. Since this description has an uncanny resemblance to the “crony capitalism” observed in many developing countries, Weber's analysis of patrimonialism has informed a new interest in the deleterious effects of patron-client networks in developing countries.

Despite its apparent relevance, Weber's analysis is misleading because it conflates the

functional requirements of advanced capitalism with the requirements of the period of transition during which capitalism is being created and institutionalized in developing countries. No capitalist country organized this process of transition by *first* instituting a rational bureaucracy. The process of transition has always been arbitrary, unjust and dominated by political interventions that are by their nature not impersonal. The analysis of this process is not our intention here, nor in making this observation are we suggesting that *all* arbitrary and unjust processes of transition lead to successful capitalist transitions. Rather, one of the challenges for political economy is to analyse why in some countries, the balance of class forces and patterns of patron-client exchanges were conducive for rapid transitions to capitalism while in others the transition was blocked.

In Bangladesh, and in the Indian subcontinent more generally, the transition to capitalism has been relatively slow. This is not unrelated to the type of patron-client networks that have dominated the political competition in these countries (Khan 1996). The strength of the intermediate classes in the Indian subcontinent relative to emerging capitalists and the state has meant that the competition over redistribution has been relatively intense. This has not only resulted in a relatively large loss of investible surplus to unproductive activities (in the way suggested by Bardhan 1984) but also and more seriously, to a perennial political instability that has prevented the process of primitive accumulation leading to accelerated capitalist growth. In the Bangladesh example, the effects of this intense factional competition combined with slow growth has been cycles of political instability, often interspersed with military dictatorships, but even the latter have not succeeded in clamping down on the organization of political competition for resources by factions.

The real irony has been that the dominance of the intermediate classes and their

factional politics slowed down the transition to capitalism in the Indian subcontinent, thereby ensuring the persistence of factional competition. This underlines the importance of combining an analysis of factionalism with an analysis of class. We have argued elsewhere that patron-client networks in other developing countries where the distribution of organizational power between classes was different often had less damaging effects for the capitalist transition (M.H. Khan 1989; Khan & Jomo 2000).

Finally, our analysis of the political economy of instability can also be contrasted with the New Institutional explanation of collective action failure offered by A.A. Khan (1996). In this essentially neoclassical approach, the absence of corporate solidarity in contemporary rural Bangladesh has been explained by the low payoffs to collective action historically, due to the peculiarities of its ecology and defence needs. The relatively easy availability of water and the great distance of East Bengal from the centres of Indian empires made collective action at the village or even higher levels of East Bengal society less compelling. There is very probably a certain amount of truth in this claim but the analysis is also quite misleading.

First, in modern Bangladesh there is a substantial amount of collective action, but this collective action is not organized along class lines and the effects of this collective action have usually been quite regressive for economic development. We have explained the specific types of collective action in Bangladesh not in terms of ecology and geography but in terms of the balance of class forces and the incentives created by primitive accumulation. Secondly, Bangladesh is not really that unique any more within the broader context of the Indian subcontinent despite its unique ecology and geography. The political instability and factional politics we see in Bangladesh will not be unfamiliar to someone from Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh or Pakistani Punjab.

While there are important differences in the details of class and social organization across the Indian subcontinent, the broad similarities in the organizational predominance of the intermediate classes and the processes of primitive accumulation have ground out quite a surprising similarity in the political and economic processes across the subcontinent.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that the intense factional conflict over resources observed in Bangladesh makes sense if we understand the context of contestable property rights and state-sponsored redistribution which we have described as primitive accumulation, together with a class context where a huge amount of organizational ability exists to lead factions. Tragically, although the factional conflict has never been about the substance of religious or secular practice, the politicization of religion has had dire consequences. Communal politics has immediate and disastrous effects for minorities. Our analysis warns us that the roots of the communal problem are deeper than prejudice and that secular forces are not necessarily significantly different in their economic motivations from communal ones. This argument is supported by the fact that in Bangladesh it has made little difference for the economy or for the subordinate classes when factions professing to be “progressive”, “socialist” or “secular” have come to power in the post-1971 period.

We have argued that the most consistent way of explaining conflicts over nationhood is to see them as an outcome of deeper processes of accumulation and accommodation. The ideologies which can serve as focal points at each stage in the contest for included and excluded groups are obviously defined by the range of values and symbols inherited from the past. Nevertheless, what is interesting for us is the way in which groups have been very flexible in adopting and rejecting labels to align

themselves with or against dominant coalitions at different stages in the political cycle. What is also interesting about these changes is that the ideological identities of the groups in and out of power did not in general *directly* reflect the material interests of competing classes. Secularism, for instance, was not the ideology of an emerging capitalist class which felt its interests were constrained by religious injunctions or “church” institutions. Instead secularism and socialism, together with Islam and other ideologies have reflected material interests *indirectly*. The economic role of ideologies has been to consolidate and distinguish shifting groups of primary factions in parties competing over resources in a context of primitive accumulation.

In making this point we have, of course, deliberately simplified and exaggerated our case. For many individuals who support political movements, beliefs in particular values are strongly felt. Nevertheless, we would argue that these individuals, most often intellectuals, have not been in the driving seat in deciding the agenda or the policy interventions of the dominant parties. There *are* differences in the precise mix of classes supporting the different parties but this cannot be read off in any simple way from their ideological banners.

Finally, while our argument has primarily been about Bangladesh, a similar fracturing of political identities is happening more slowly in India and Pakistan. What is interesting about the Bangladesh experience is that it shows how political fracturing can happen even in a relatively homogenous region of the Indian subcontinent where the bulk of the politically active population is not divided by language, religion or caste. It is much easier in such a context to examine the economic imperatives which may be persuading competing factions to look for identities. While an economic explanation does not detract from the importance of an analysis of culture and ideology, it suggests that the roots of the political instability facing the Indian

subcontinent may lie in the accumulation strategies of upwardly mobile groups using a variety of ideological symbols to differentiate themselves from competing groups.

If economic motivations have driven ideological conflict and fragmentation, this clearly has implications for attempts to resolve the problem of instability in the Indian subcontinent by looking for new, more or less inclusive, “national” identities. Our argument suggests that these attempts are unlikely to succeed as long as the factional competition unleashed by the weak property rights and state-engineered redistribution during primitive accumulation is not addressed. This point is forcefully established when we examine the Bangladesh experience, where political stability was not achieved even though two partitions led to the creation of a relatively homogenous country in 1971 with an apparently coherent national identity.

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