

**Problems of Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh:
An Empirical Study**

By

Farah Deeba Chowdhury

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters of Arts
in the Joint Women's Studies Programme**

at

**Mount Saint Vincent University
Saint Mary's University
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09/06/2004

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**Dedicated to the memory of my only brother
Babar**

Abstract

This thesis entitled “**Problems of Women’s Political Participation in Bangladesh: An Empirical Study**” finds that women’s participation in politics is extremely limited in Bangladesh despite the unique experience of having a woman prime minister and a woman opposition leader. How did Bangladesh get these two women political leaders? Despite having these two leaders why is women’s political participation extremely low? What are the problems of women politicians of Bangladesh? My thesis identifies the problems that women themselves face when participating as active politicians. In order to identify the problems I interviewed twenty-three women members of the 7th parliament in Bangladesh. I find that Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia – two women leaders emerged in Bangladesh politics due to the low level of political institutionalization and patriarchy. Paradoxically, these are the main reasons, which keep women in general down.

My study suggests that women of Bangladesh must fight against patriarchy so that women are considered as human beings. At the same time women must also fight for political institutionalization, which will prevent violence and corrupt practices. Then rational debate about the vital issues of the people, not money or muscle power will be the dominant factor of electoral politics in Bangladesh. If reason becomes a dominant factor, then women can participate equally in the decision-making process of Bangladesh.

Farah Deeba Chowdhury
10.06.2004

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Bangladesh has had a woman prime minister and a woman leader of the opposition in the *Jatiya Sangsad* (the Parliament of Bangladesh) since 1991. The constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Article 28 (2) declares that women shall have rights equal to those of men in all spheres of the state and public life. In order to increase women's participation, there were constitutional provisions for 30 reserved seats for women in the parliament of Bangladesh. Still women's participation in politics was not ensured in a real sense. The selection process of the reserved seats put the indirectly elected women parliamentarians under the grip of male dominated party leadership and made them act as, what has been called, "the vote bank" of the treasury bench. Due to this dependency relationship and low profile of the female parliamentarians in the reserved seats, they were branded as "30 sets of ornaments."¹ In the 7th Parliament (1996-2001) the percentage of directly elected women members was 2.7 and including reserved seats it was 11.5 percent, which was much higher than in the 1st Parliament of 1973 (Table 1). The provision of reserved seats for women ceased to be operative in April 4, 2001.² The abolishment of the reserved seats revealed the true situation all the more starkly. In the 8th Parliament the representation of female members declined to even further to 2.3%. Why are Bangladeshi women not more prominent in politics despite having a woman prime minister and a woman opposition leader? How did these two women leaders emerge as prominent leaders in Bangladesh politics?

¹ Naseem A Hussain and Al Masud Hasanuzzaman, "Women in the Legislature in Bangladesh," *Asian Studies*, No.17, June 1998, 81.

² *Bhorer Kagoj*, June 18, 2000.

| Election Year | Women Candidates | Women elected members | Reserved seats for women | Women Members |
|---------------|------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| 1973 | 0.3 | 0 | 4.8 | 4.8 |
| 1979 | 0.9 | 0.7 | 9.1 | 9.8 |
| 1986 | 1.3 | 1.5 | 9.1 | 10.6 |
| 1988 | 0.7 | 1.3 | 0 | 1.3 |
| 1991 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 9.1 | 10.6 |
| 1996 | 1.4 | 2.4 | 9.1 | 11.5 |
| 2001 | 2.0 | 2.3 | 0 | 2.3 |

Source: Shawkat Ara Hussain, "Women's Participation in Electoral Politics," *Empowerment*, Vol.7, 2000, 70; *The Daily Star*, October 1, 2001; *Prothom Alo*, April 14, 2001; *Prothom Alo*, August 22, 2003.

The general rule is that the higher the position, the fewer the women. Here we have an enigma. At the apex of political power there are two women in the parliament continuously since 1991, but below these two leaders the percentage of women members in the parliament is almost nil. What are the problems of women politicians of Bangladesh? My study will identify the problems that women faced when they were participating as active politicians.

Conceptual and Theoretical Issues

Political Participation

Political participation is a multi-dimensional concept, which involves voting, election campaigning, collective actions around policy issues, contacting political representatives, protests and demonstrations.³ Palma refers to participation as "... the expression and the product of a person's integration into the system of social and political relations."⁴ Huntington and Nelson identify diverse forms of political participation; electoral activity, lobbying, organizational activity, and personal contacting. They also include violence if it

³ Michael Bratton, "Political Participation In A New Democracy Institutional Considerations From Zambia," *Comparative Political Studies*, 32:5, August 1999, 552.

⁴ Giuseppe Di Palma, *Apathy and Participation Mass Politics in Western Societies*, New York: The Free Press, 1970, 4.

is occurred in order to influence government decision-making by physical damage to persons or property.⁵

Richard Little views mass political participation “as the involvement of individual citizens in collective political activities related to the functions performed by the formal institutions of the political system.”⁶ Milbrath and Goel point out that it involves not only active roles played by the individual citizens to affect governmental decision, but also ceremonial and supportive activities.⁷ According to Weiner, political participation refers to “any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organized or unorganized, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods intended to influence the choice of public policies, the administration of public affairs or the choice of political leaders at any level of government, local or national.”⁸ In this thesis I will look at the problems of women’s participation in the national level politics of Bangladesh.

Political institutionalization

Samuel P. Huntington defines institutionalization as “the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability.”⁹ He identifies four criteria of political institutionalization: adaptability-rigidity, complexity-simplicity, autonomy-subordination, and coherence-disunity.

⁵ S. P. Huntington & Joan M. Nelson, *No Easy Choice Political Participation in Developing Countries*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976, 12-13.

⁶ Little D. Richard, “Mass Political Participation in the U.S and the U.S.S.R. A conceptual Analysis,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 8:4, January 1976, 454.

⁷ Lester W. Milbrath and Goel M.L., *Political Participation How and Why Do People Get Involved in politics?*, Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Company, 1977, 2.

⁸ Myron Weiner, “Political Participation: Crisis of the Political Process,” In Leonard Binder *et al.*, (eds.), *Crises and Sequence in Political Development*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, 164.

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1968, 12.

Adaptability-rigidity

Huntington argues that “The more adaptable an organization or procedure is, the more highly institutionalized it is; the less adaptable and more rigid it is, the lower its level of institutionalization.” If an organization faces more challenges and if its age is greater, then it is more adaptable. Rigidity is a sign of more young organizations. If an organization undergoes peaceful succession of leadership, then it is a more highly institutionalized organization. Huntington claims that sometimes a nationalist party whose role was to free the country from colonialism, after achieving independence finds it difficult to adapt itself to govern the country.¹⁰

Complexity-simplicity

Huntington claims that “complexity may involve both multiplication of organizational subunits, hierarchically and functionally, and differentiation of separate types of organizational subunits.” If the numbers of subunits of an organization are higher, then the ability to secure and maintain the loyalty of the members will be higher too. An organization, which has many objectives, can adjust more than an organization that has only one objective. The simplest political system depends on one person. Huntington argues that a political system having several different political institutions is more adaptable, because sometimes one type of institutions can meet the need and sometimes other types of institutions can meet the needs.¹¹

Autonomy-Subordination

If an organization protects the interests of particular social groups, then it lacks autonomy. Huntington claims that a political party that does not articulate and aggregate the interests of various social groups is less autonomous. A highly institutionalized

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17-20.

political system can minimize the role of violence and prevent the influence of wealth in the system. Political organizations and procedures that have no autonomy are considered as corrupt.¹² Corruption is a criterion of lack of effective political institutionalization.¹³ Violence is occurred in the political system where strong parties are absent.¹⁴

Huntington rightly points out,

In a highly institutionalized political system, the most important positions of leadership can normally only be achieved by those who have served an apprenticeship in less important positions. The complexity of a political system contributes to its autonomy by providing a variety of organizations and positions in which individuals are prepared for the highest offices.¹⁵

Coherence-Disunity:

A highly institutionalized organization is unified and coherent and disunity is a criterion of low level of institutionalization. Coherence and autonomy are closely linked and autonomy is a means to coherence that makes an organization highly developed. Some measures of consensus are essential for an effective organization. Huntington says that coordination and discipline are important factors for political institutionalization.¹⁶

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is an ancient Greek word that means “the rule of the father.” Originally this word was used to mean the herding societies of the Old Testament where father’s

¹² *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, , 409.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*,21-22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-24.

authority over family members was absolute.¹⁷ Gerda Lerner argues that patriarchy is a historic creation by men and women and patriarchal family is the basic unit of its organization. She notes,

From the second millennium B.C forward, control over the sexual behavior of citizens has been a major means of social control in every state society. Conversely, class hierarchy is constantly reconstituted in the family through sexual dominance. Regardless of the political and economic system, the kind of personality which, can function in a hierarchical system is created and nurtured within the patriarchal family.¹⁸

Lerner refers to patriarchy as “the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general.”¹⁹ She claims that men hold power and women are deprived of access to power, but it does not mean that women do not have any power or they are totally deprived of their rights, influence, and resources.²⁰

Radical feminist Kate Millett used this concept to describe male domination over women.²¹ For Millett, the main institution of patriarchy is the family. The family encourages its members to conform to the sexually differentiated roles and maintain women’s inferior position.²² She argues that patriarchy is based on two sets of principles: men shall dominate women and older men shall dominate younger men.²³ She views patriarchy in terms of its public dimension. She writes, “The military, industry,

¹⁷ Marlene LeGates, *In Their Time A History of Feminism in Western Society*, London: Routledge, 2001, 11-12.

¹⁸ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, 216.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970.

²² *Ibid.*, 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, 25.

technology, universities, science, political office, and finance- in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands.”²⁴

Socialist feminist Heidi Hartmann states that patriarchal control is mainly maintained through the appropriation of women’s labour. She states that before capitalism, the patriarchal system prevailed where men controlled the labour of women and children in the family.²⁵ In the capitalist society men’s superiority is maintained through job segregation by sex, because it enforces women’s lower wages in the labour market. Due to the lower wages women are dependant on men and they have to perform domestic responsibilities. She argues, “Men, benefit then, from both higher wages and the domestic division of labour. This domestic division of labour, in turn, acts to weaken women’s position in the labour market.”²⁶ She argues that women must struggle against both patriarchy and capitalist society in order to liberate themselves.²⁷ Hartman defines patriarchy as a system of male oppression in which there are not only hierarchal relations between men, but also there is solidarity among men which provides them with the ability to control women.²⁸

Zillah Eisenstein is a socialist feminist who believes that the sex class division is more fundamental to human society than the economic class division that has changed historically with the changes in economic organizations.²⁹ Eisenstein claims,

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Heidi Hartmann, “Capitalism, Patriarchy, And Job Segregation by Sex,” in Zillah R. Eisenstein (ed.) *Capitalist Patriarchy And The Case For Socialist Feminism*, London: Monthly Review Press, 1979, 207.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 208,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 232.

²⁹ Bonnie J. Fox, “Conceptualizing Patriarchy,” *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 25:2 May 1988, 175.

Patriarchy and capitalism operate within the sexual division of labour and society rather than within the family. A sexual division of labour and society that defines people's activity, purposes, goals, desires, and dreams according to their biological sex, is at the base of patriarchy and capitalism. It divides men and women into their respective hierarchical sex roles and structures their related duties in the family domain and within the economy.³⁰

Maria Mies differs with Eisenstein and argues, "As capitalism is necessarily patriarchal it would be misleading to talk of two separate systems."³¹ Capitalism cannot function without patriarchy, because the goal of this system is capital accumulation and it cannot be achieved if patriarchal men-woman relations are not maintained or reconstructed.³² Patriarchy and capitalism are closely connected, and capitalism is another form of patriarchy. Mies argues that male dominance does not mean only the rule of fathers, but also rule of husbands, male bosses and ruling men of society, politics and economy.³³

Sylvia Walby views patriarchy from a multi-dimensional approach. She defines patriarchy "as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women."³⁴ The main element of patriarchy is "systematically structured gender inequality."³⁵ She argues that patriarchy consists of six structures:

³⁰ Zillah Eisenstein, "Developing A Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy and Socialist Feminism," in Zillah R. Eisenstein (ed.) *Capitalist Patriarchy And The Case For Socialist Feminism*, London: Monthly Review Press, 1979, 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale Women in the International Division of Labour*, London: Zed Books, 1986, 38.

³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁴ Sylvia Walby, "The 'Declining Significance' or the Changing Forms' of Patriarchy?," in Valentine M. Moghadam ed., *Patriarchy And Economic Development Women's Positions at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

household work, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions.³⁶

Walby says that there are two forms of patriarchy: private and public. Private patriarchy is based on household production in which men control women individually. Public patriarchy is a form whereby the expropriation of women is performed collectively. Private patriarchy is maintained by women's non-participation in public life. Walby points out that "In the public form of patriarchy the exploitation of women takes place at all levels, but women are not formally excluded from any. In each institution women are disadvantaged."³⁷

In this thesis I will use the concept of patriarchy to refer to a system in which decision-making power and economic control are vested in the hands of men. Bangladeshi patriarchal society gives high value to sons and they receive preferential treatment and access to better nutrition, health care and education. They control all economic and political power through private and public patriarchy.

Using this definition of patriarchy and Huntington's theory of political institutionalization, I will identify and assess the problems of women's political participation in Bangladesh.

Methodology

Data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The source of primary data was interview. Of thirty-eight³⁸ female Members of the 7th Parliament, twenty-three agreed to be interviewed. I approached all women parliamentarians to give interview and this is a success rate of 60.5%. I decided to interview female parliamentarians because

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

³⁸ Eight female Members of Parliament were elected directly from the general seats in the 7th Parliament, *Prothom Alo*, April 14, 2001.

they were the women representatives in the national decision-making process and I believed that they could understand and express fully the problems of women in the national politics. The women parliamentarians were informed that I was interested in doing research on the problems of women's political participation in Bangladesh and I wanted to write an academic article on the basis of the results of interviews. They gave me interviews voluntarily. I came from my work place Rajshahi to the capital city Dhaka. I stayed in Dhaka in January 2000 and I was able to interview twenty-three women parliamentarians. Some interviews were held at the MP Hostel, Dhaka and some interviews were held in women parliamentarians' house. Two interviews were held in their offices.

My supervisor and co-coordinator of my department agreed that I could use these data in my masters thesis. Accordingly I applied for approval from the Research Ethics Board of Saint Mary's University. Approval was granted on 28th October 2003.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted through open discussion. I chose this method because I thought that informal and unstructured interviews could explore the real problems of women in political participation. In this method, the interviewer is relatively nondirective and the person interviewed is fairly unconstrained in what he or she talks about. I asked the questions not in the way of interrogation, but in the way of discussion and the interview was more like a conversation. Sometimes I talked about my life and even responded to questions asked by the respondents. The whole process of interview was interactive and collaborative. In order to understand the class character and political experience, I used a brief questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Then I started open discussion with the basic question: what problems do you face in participating in active politics.

While interviewing I carried a notebook with me. I wrote only important notes on it. Every night I filled in the details. In Bangladeshi context, taking notes is better than using a tape recorder, because Bangladeshi women do not want to disclose their secret aspects of life to anybody. Therefore, they are afraid of having their speech recorded. They may even sometimes refuse to give interview or provide false information about their life. Depending on memory and taking notes are better for the study of Bangladeshi women.

In Bangladesh, the researchers' class is very important, and the status of the person conducting the interview very significant. In Bangladesh women politicians come from the wealthy class and there is a substantial gap between the leaders and the general mass of people. They do not want to talk freely with general class of women. Therefore, if the woman researcher is not from the upper class of the society in terms of money, education or occupation, she cannot manage to get the interview. In the context of Bangladesh, if anyone wants to interview middle class or upper-class women, it is also necessary to be a stranger, because Bangladeshi women do not want to disclose their family problems to their friends. Women always want to stay within family. Generally they do not want to break up their family. The disclosure of their problems regarding husbands undermines their positions. If the researcher is a stranger and she can build rapport with the respondents, then she can ascertain the ideas and thoughts of her women respondents. In Bangladeshi context, women should interview other women in order to get the real experiences, because women's purdah is maintained by not talking too much to men. Women are not socialized to express everything to other men.

I was a stranger to women Members of Parliament. My university teaching position helped me to build rapport with the female members, because in Bangladesh

university teaching is considered as an upper class profession. And because I am a woman, female members talked to me freely. To analyze the problems of women politicians identified by the women parliamentarians I also used secondary sources. These include books, journal articles, Internet sites, reports and newspapers

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Three categories of relevant literature were reviewed for this study: women in global politics, women in South Asian politics, and women in Bangladesh politics.

Women in Global Politics

It is necessary to look at the picture of women's political engagement in a country in the context of global systems and changes. Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury¹ point out that during the years of structural adjustment, government expenditures on the social sector decreased. Although the nature of the negative consequence for women differed from country to country, the overall impact of structural adjustment policies was negative for women. In Bangladesh structural adjustment policy was also unable to leave positive impact for women. The privatization policy created more unemployment for women than men. The retrenched workers had not been able to get reemployment. The loss of job of a woman affected her family more than that of a man, because women are the manager of household.²

State-focused nationalism has been challenged by the emergence of ethnic, communal, and regional forces. In some cases, these forces want to alter national boundaries. The writers point out that the fear of European feminists is that the new

¹ Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury (eds.), *Women and Politics Worldwide*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

² http://www.saprin.org/bangladesh/research/ban_women_sum.pdf.

regionalism and economic restructuring will decrease the nationally supported social programs, which help women to manage child rearing activities and paid job.

The writers point out that the changing nature of nationalism and the rise of religious fundamentalism are challenging universalism and secularism. In my view, in Bangladesh there are some fundamentalists forces, but these are not powerful. Although Islamic parties are the coalition partners of the present Khaleda Zia government, Islamic militancy was not observed in the election. Rather, the performance of the Awami League's (AL) government over the preceding five years was the main issue in the election. People did not see any do-or-die Islamic agenda.³ In the 2001 parliamentary election the Islamists and the BNP fought in the election against the Awami League, but Khaleda Zia did not share the same manifesto with the Islamic parties.⁴ Once the chairman of a faction of the Islamic Oikko Jote asked Prime minister Khaleda Zia about the decision of a demand to declare *Qadiani*-an Islamic sect as non-Muslim. She replied, "The government has nothing to do regarding this issue. It is an issue of religious freedom. The whole world believes in individual freedom. It is not right to interfere the freedom of other people. The foreigners do not like it. We have to move forward considering the whole situation of the world."⁵ In the 2001 election the Jamaat-i-Islami-an Islamic party received only 4.29% of the popular vote.⁶

The writers argue that universalism and secularism provide opportunities for women to participate in both civil society and the state. The economic dependence of

³ M. Rashiduzzaman, "Bangladesh in 2001 The Election and a New Political Reality?" *Asian Survey*, 42:1, 2002, 187.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁵ *Prothom Alo*, January 15, 2004.

⁶ M. Rashiduzzaman, "Bangladesh in 2001 The Election and a New Political Reality?" 188.

some Muslim countries on the rich Islamic oil-producing countries also helps to explain the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

Women’s movement or women’s activism is observed in different places. The writers find that “in no country do women have political status, access or influence equal to that enjoyed by men.” Table 2 demonstrates the same trend. It shows that proportion of women parliamentarians is higher in Nordic countries than elsewhere in the world, but still gender equality is not achieved. It is apparent that 18.2% women are represented in the parliaments of the Americas, 15.5% in Europe OSCE members countries excluding Nordic countries, 15.3% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 14.5% in Asia, 12.2% in Pacific countries. The Arab countries have 6.2%, the lowest percentage of women’s representation in the parliaments.

| | Single or Lower House | Upper House | Both Houses Combined |
|--|------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Nordic Countries | 39.7 | - | 39.7 |
| Americas | 18.2 | 18.2 | 18.2 |
| Europe OSCE Members countries excluding Nordic Countries | 15.6 | 15.4 | 15.5 |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 15.1 | 17.3 | 15.3 |
| Asia | 14.9 | 14.0 | 14.8 |
| Pacific | 10.9 | 20.5 | 12.2 |
| Arab States | 6.0 | 7.5 | 6.2 |
| World | 15.3 | 15.1 | 15.3 |

Source: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

In Chowdhury and Nelson’s book, the contributor of each chapter provides an analysis of women’s political engagement in her own country. Each author discusses how women identify and represent their interests, and analyses three important issues to

women. Authors select the issues, which they analyze on the basis of their national contexts.⁷

Reynolds' article entitled "Women in the Legislatures and Executives of the World: Knocking at the Highest Glass Ceiling"⁸ is a survey of the governments of the world in 1998. This article examines the position of women in the legislative lower houses and executives in 180 nation-states and tests the leading hypotheses regarding women's political representation. The hypothesized factors are female socioeconomic development, dominant religion, long history of women's political participation, orientation of the political party, party fragmentation, consolidated democracy, and electoral systems. This article reports on statistical analysis of women's political representation. The writer finds that the representation of women in the legislatures and executives depends on the religious orientation of the nation states. On average, women of majority-Christian countries fill 12.8% of legislative positions. Hindu and Buddhist nations have the next highest number and Muslim and Jewish states have the fewer number of women in the parliament. The writer did not explain how a Muslim country like Bangladesh got a woman prime minister and a woman opposition leader in 1998.

The writer also examines the position of women political executives and finds that most women cabinet ministers came from Africa. The number was eighty-four. The next highest number is from Western Europe and that is eighty. Twenty percent of cabinet

⁷ Here lies the limitation of this book. The issues that the author selects as important may be not equally important to other women of that country. There may be differences of opinion; women's interests and women's issues differ from women to women. There are women of different classes, castes, religions, and ethnic groups in a country. Does the author's view represent all sections of women? This is not clear in this book.

⁸ Andrew Reynolds, "Women in the Legislatures and Executives of the World Knocking at the Highest Glass Ceiling," *World Politics*, 51, July 1999, 547-572.

ministers of Western Europe are women; in Oceania and the Middle East less than four percent cabinet ministers are women. He points out that Christian dominated countries had the highest proportion of women cabinet members (11.1%).

Across the world women executives hold the softer socio-cultural positions rather than harder and politically important positions. Women generally handle health, education, women's affairs, cultural, family/and child affairs ministries. Very few women handle the key ministries of foreign affairs, finance, home affairs, and defense. Reynolds argues that a nation's familiarity with women in positions of power and sociopolitical and cultural acceptance of women leaders are the determining factors of women's political participation. Women-friendly political institutions are also necessary for providing increased opportunities for women.

Women in South Asian Politics

South Asia is composed of seven countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Table 3 shows that the position of women in South Asian politics is very low though higher than the Middle Eastern Countries. Among the South Asian countries, Pakistan has the highest percentage of women representatives (21.6% in the lower house and 18.0% in the upper house) in the parliament. According to the law of 2002, 60 (17%) of 342 seats are reserved for women in the national assembly of Pakistan. These seats are allocated to the political parties proportionally, according to the electoral result. The names are picked from the top of a list of 60 women, that each party presents

to the electoral authorities before the election.⁹ Men parliamentarians have not yet accepted the presence of women in the national assembly, as they are not being given opportunities to play an effective role in the assembly proceedings.¹⁰ One male parliamentarian called his women colleagues “sweet dish.” He claimed, “women were brought to the national and provincial Assemblies as sweet dish, otherwise they have no role.”¹¹

| | Lower or Single House | | | Upper House or Senate | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|----------|------------|-----------------------|-------|---------|
| | Seats | Women | % Women | Seats | Women | % Women |
| Bangladesh | 300 | 7 | 2.3 | - | - | - |
| Bhutan | 150 | 14 | 9.3 | - | - | - |
| India | 543 | 48 | 8.8 | 242 | 25 | 10.3 |
| Maldives | 50 | 3 | 6.0 | - | - | - |
| Nepal | 205 | 12 | 5.9 | 60 | 5 | 8.3 |
| Pakistan | 342 | 74 | 21.6 | 100 | 18 | 18.0 |
| Sri Lanka | 225 | 10 | 4.4 | - | - | - |
| Average | - | - | 8.3 | - | - | 12.2 |

Source: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

Table 3 also demonstrates that women representatives in the parliament of Bhutan are 9.3%. Maldives has 6.0%, and Sri Lanka has 4.4% women representatives in the parliament. Like Pakistan, India and Nepal have two houses in the parliament. In India, 8.8% women representatives are in the lower house and 10.3% are in the upper house. In Nepal 5.9% women parliamentarians are in the upper house and 8.3% in the lower house. Among the South Asian countries, in Bangladesh women’s political representation in the parliament is the lowest at 2.3%. Despite the low participation of women in politics, we observe the emergence of women leaders in this region where religion is a dominant

⁹ <http://www.idea.int/quota/displayCountry.cfm?CountryCode=PK>

¹⁰ <http://www.dawn.com/2003/04/01/nat4.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.pakistan-facts.com/article.php/20030806140411160>

factor in politics. Here religion did not hinder the emergence of women leadership in the key positions. The fact remains that most of them came through family connections.

Rounaq Jahan's article entitled "Women in South Asian Politics"¹² examines three issues: women in leadership, women in mainstream politics, and new women's movement as an alternative to the mainstream. Data are drawn from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka of South Asia where women gained leadership positions. Jahan notes that in South Asia since the 1960s, a large number of women gained the highest leadership positions in the government and the opposition through their family connections. By their family connections, they could overcome the problems that women otherwise face in politics in the world. She notes that in South Asia it is very difficult to achieve national leadership from a working class background. In this society, a man is valued for what he achieves, a woman is valued for the class in which she was born. Most women politicians were from urban middle class families and were educated at urban schools and colleges. Jahan identifies the problems as lack of money, time, skill and experience, patronage, contacts, and information.

Particularly in South Asia, she observes that the purda system restricts women's mobility. She notes:

Purda in the strictest sense of the term involves keeping women confined within the four walls of the home and putting them in a veil when they move out of the home. In a wide sense, purda refers to women's modesty and restrictions on their interactions with males who do not fall within specific categories of kin

¹² Raunaq Jahan, "Women in South Asian Politics," *Third World Quarterly*, .9:3, July 1987, 848-870.

relationship. Purda thus results in the segregation of the sexes and creates two separate worlds for men and women.¹³

All South Asian countries have seen a resurgence of religious fundamentalism, which reinforces the sexual division of labour, female seclusion, and gender segregation. Jahan argues that in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the women's movement should find their own interpretation of Islam, which will ensure women's equality, and it should create mass support around that interpretation.

Jahan argues that muscle power is a necessary element of organizational politics of South Asia. She notes,

Building support in South Asia often requires not only mobilization, but also muscle power; *goondas* (armed henchmen) are a necessary element of organization politics. Again, it is much more difficult for women to keep retinues of *goondas* to help in factional fights with their rivals.¹⁴

Most of the time women played supportive roles in politics. They participate in voting, in campaigning, in mobilizing electoral support-specially women's support. But they generally do not stand for elections. Women are also active in trade union movement and peasant struggle, but not as leaders. A very limited number of women can be elected and they come from rich, urban, and educated family background. They have very little contact with the village.

¹³ Rounaq Jahan, "Purda and Participation: Women in the Politics of Bangladesh," in Gail Minault and Hanna Papanek (eds.), *Separate Worlds Studies of Purda in South Asia*, Columbia: South Asia Books, 1982, 274.

¹⁴ Raunaq Jahan, "Women in South Asian Politics," 862.

In South Asia, new women's movements have emerged and this raises new issues, which centre on poor working class women. Jahan points out that the movement put emphasis on the problems of urban and rural poor working class women. It created new leadership, which forged close relationships between middle class and poor class working women. As a result, new autonomous grassroots women's organizations emerged which highlighted participatory organizational behaviour.

Sooryarmoorthy and Renjini write about the political participation of women councilors of Kerala, India.¹⁵ According to the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment Act of India, one-third of the seats of the local bodies are reserved for women. In India there are more than 500 district *panchayats*, 5,100 block/taluka *panchayats* and 2,25,000 village *panchayats*, 90 municipal corporations, 1,500 municipal councils, and 1,800 *nagar panchayats*. Provision of reserved seats for women in the local bodies provides an opportunity for women to participate in the local bodies.

The writers examine the socio-economic and political background of women councilors of the municipalities and corporations of Kerala. In Kerala there are 1,582 councilors in municipalities and corporations, of whom 547 (34.6%) are women and 1,035 (65.4%) are men. They interviewed 306 councilors, which is 55.9% of the total number of women councilors. About half of the women councilors interviewed are in the age of 28-42 years. Only 7.1% women are in the age group of above 58 years. There are no illiterate women councilors. Except for 12%, all have school final (SSLC) educational qualification and above. They are employed in different occupations, namely, school

¹⁵ R. Sooryarmoorthy and Renjini D., "Political Participation of Women: The Case of Women Councilors in Kerala, India," *Journal of Third World Studies*, 17:1, 2000, 45-60.

teaching, college teaching, lawyers, low-level administrative jobs. Majority is Hindu, the next number is Christian and then Muslim, but the contrast is that in Kerala there are more Muslims than Christians. Therefore, Christian women are over represented. The women councilors' average family income is considered as middle-income type. The number of both the lower income family and upper income family is same in the sample. Sixty percent of the respondents have previous experience in political party activities. Over 85% women do not have previous experience in contesting an election.

A number of respondents reported that they were compelled by their friends and party men to contest the election. The writers did not explain how they were compelled by their friends and party men. One-third of respondents could not explain why they contested the election. The majority of women councilors reported that they did not face any difficulties in the decision making process. Nonetheless, 28.4% women councilors felt that it was very hard to get along with men during discussion and deliberations in the council; 10% felt that male councilors did not accept them in their new public roles; 11.1% experienced male dominance, and 3.27% felt neglected when taking decision. It is not explained by the writers how the women councilors felt discrimination.

Pradeep Chhibber's article entitled "Why Are Some Women Politically Active? The Household, Public Space, And Political Participation In India"¹⁶ explores why some women are politically active in the context of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment Act of India. The writer argues that women's household activities are responsible for their lower participation in politics. He points out that women who are less constrained in

¹⁶Pradeep Chhibber, "Why Are Some Women Politically Active? The Household, Public Space, And Political Participation In India," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 43:3-5, 2002,409-429.

the home are more active participants in politics. A survey conducted in 1996 in six states of India suggests that women's participation was very low in the local political process despite the provision of reserved seats. Chhibber points out that if women exercise autonomy in and from the home, they can actively participate in politics. He notes, "As long as women are confined to the home and they do not have an identity independent of the household, their levels of political participation will necessarily be lower than men's because they cannot be in the public space."¹⁷ The author claims that similar patterns exist globally.

Ranjana Kumari and Anju Dubey in their book entitled *Women Parliamentarians A study in the Indian Context*¹⁸ analyze the role and involvement of women in the parliament and the political parties. Data were collected through structured questionnaire and interview. The writers argue that most of the women MPs are not articulate and expressive. Most of them are showpieces and they cannot participate in the decision-making bodies of the party. They came to politics through their family connections. Within the parties, women's issues are categorized as social and not political issues. Their age is important, because junior parliamentarians have to work hard to prove that they are capable. In this book the writers did not analyze the reasons of the low participation of women in politics.

In 1960 Sri Lanka became the first country of the world whose government was headed by a woman. Still Sri Lankan society thinks that women's main concerns should be home and family. Robert N. Kearney observes that political women of Sri Lanka

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 415.

¹⁸ Ranjana Kumari and Anju Dubey, *Women Parliamentarians A study in the Indian Context*, Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1994.

mainly emerged from a political family or through a close male relative in politics. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who was the first woman prime minister of the world, came to active politics after the assassination of her husband S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike who was the prime minister of Sri Lanka. Her early political commitment to the public was to continue the policies of her late husband. Kearney rightly points out about the developing countries, “Although the notions of women’s roles as excluding public life remain prevalent, a relatively low or uneven level of institutionalism and the enduring strength of kinship permit a wife or daughter to succeed to a vacated public office as a symbol of or stand-in for the former male occupant, in the absence of a suitable male heir.”¹⁹ This is the most intriguing explanation proposed thus far.

Benazir Bhutto²⁰ became Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988 at the age of 35. She was first woman to lead the government of a Muslim country. Her father Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was overthrown through a military coup led by General Zia-ul Huq in 1977 and executed two years later in 1979. Benazir Bhutto was arrested on numerous occasions; she spent many years either in prison or under detention. Benazir graduated from Harvard University with a degree in Political Science. After graduating from Harvard, she joined Oxford University in the fall of 1973. Just before graduation, Benazir was elected to the Standing Committee of the most prestigious Oxford Union Debating Society. In 1976, she graduated in Politics, Philosophy and Economics. In the autumn of

¹⁹Robert N. Kearney, “Women in Politics in Sri Lanka,” *Asian Survey*, 21:7, July 1981, 729-746.

²⁰ Benazir Bhutto, *Daughter of the East*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988.

1976, Benazir returned once again to Oxford to do a one-year postgraduate course. In January 1977, she was elected the President of the Oxford Union.²¹

Benazir married Asif Zardari in 1987. When Benazir received a proposal of marriage from Asif Zardari, she was concerned that her future husband might not tolerate her busy political life, or whether he would accept that her first commitment would be to the people of Pakistan. Benazir was also concerned about the feelings of the people of Pakistan. She writes, “If I married, would they think I no longer needed them?”²² She points out that western feminism is different from eastern feminism where religious and family obligations are considered central issues. After Benazir’s engagement to be married she released a statement to the press,

Conscious of my religious obligations and duty to my family, I am pleased to proceed with the marriage proposal accepted by my mother, Begum Nusrat Bhutto. The impending marriage will not in the way affect my political commitmentThe people of Pakistan deserve a better, more secure future and I shall be with them seeking it.²³

On the other hand, male politicians do not have to worry that whether their wives would accept their busy political life or whether the people would think that after marriage men might give up politics for family obligations, because traditionally politics is male business. In order to convince the male dominated, conservative Pakistani society that a woman could lead them, Benazir spoke to the Pathan people of Pakistan:

²¹ www.storyofpakistan.com/person.asp?perid=P024

²² *Ibid.*, 305.

²³ *Ibid.*, 310.

People think I am weak because I am a woman. Do they not know that I am a Muslim woman, and Muslim women have a heritage to be proud of? I have the patience of Bibi Khadiza, the wife of the Prophet, Peace Be Upon Him. I have the perseverance of Bibi Zeinab, the sister of Imam Hussain. And I have the courage of Bibi Aisha, The Prophet's favorite wife, who rode her own camel into battle at the head of the Muslims. I am the daughter of martyr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the sister of martyr Shah Nawaz Khan Bhutto and I am your sister as well. I challenge my opponents to come and meet me on the field of democratic elections.²⁴

In her autobiography Benazir described herself as a practicing Muslim who always says prayer, recites the holy Quran, observes all Islamic rituals and believes that everyone will return to Allah. She also wrote that the concept of equality between men and women is not anti-Islamic:

There was no question in my family that my sister and I would be given the same opportunities in life as my brothers. Nor was there in Islam. We learned at an early age that it was men's interpretation of our religion that restricted women's opportunities, not our religion itself.²⁵

Benazir provided many examples of her Party's adherence to Islam. Her father gave the first Islamic constitution to Pakistan in 1973, printed the first error-free Holy Quran in Pakistan, made religious education compulsory in primary and secondary level, and introduced Arabic-language programming on television, which is the language of the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

Holy Quran.²⁶ While in jail, Julfikar Ali Bhutto reminded Benazir when she planned to visit Northwest Frontier province, “You are going into the tribal areas. Don’t forget how conservative they are. Sometimes your *dupatta* falls off your head while you’re speaking. Remember to put it back up.”²⁷ Thus Benazir Bhutto was able to be accepted as a leader in Pakistan through her deft use of Islamic symbols and Islamic interpretation where religion plays an important role in politics.

Women in Bangladesh Politics

The purda system of Muslim society shapes the pattern of women’s political participation in Bangladesh.²⁸ Rounaq Jahan did the first work on women and politics in Bangladesh. Her article, “Purda and Participation: Women in the Politics of Bangladesh” argues that purda literally creates public-private dichotomy, which restricts women’s political participation. Women have limited contacts with people who are not the members of their extended family. They cannot participate in mass rallies and demonstration, which are considered as public. In Bangladesh, new young politicians need a patron in the political party, but if a woman has a patron, her professional relationship will be misconstrued as a sexual liaison with the male leader. She notes, “Only those women succeed in politics who are related to powerful politicians and can use the connection without invoking any

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁸ Rounaq Jahan, “Purda and Participation: Women in the Politics of Bangladesh,” in Gail Minault and Hanna Papanek (eds.), *Separate Worlds Studies of Purda in South Asia*, Columbia: South Asia Books, 1982, 262-282. Najma Chowdhury, “Women in Politics,” *Empowerment*, 1, 1994, 37-59, Najma Chowdhury, “Bangladesh: Gender Issues and Politics in a Patriarchy,” in Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury (eds.), *Women and Politics Worldwide*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, 94-113.

suspicion of loose morals.”²⁹ In Bangladesh, political imprisonment is considered as a political sacrifice, admirable, regular part of career. But if a woman is raped by police while in prison, she cannot use this as a political sacrifice to promote her career.

Jahan recognizes that purda is not only reason, which hinders women’s participation. She notes that in order to increase the women’s participation in politics women’s economic status should be changed and socio-cultural norms of purda society should be challenged. She argues that socio-cultural revolution, which radically changed the status of women of Soviet Union, China and Vietnam and the cultural revolution like western women’s movement are necessary to challenge the traditional cultural norm which keeps women isolated and inferior.

Najma Chowdhury in her article entitled “Women in Politics: Impact of Religion on Women’s Participation – The case of Bangladesh”³⁰ argues that Islam exercises authoritative influence on the totality of human life. In Islamic theology, equality between men and women is recognized, but it also stipulates women’s dependence on men. According to the Quran, men are the protector and provider. In order to explain the equality between men and women, she notes that, according to the Quran, husband and wife are each other’s “garments” which means that their relationship is based on mutual support, mutual love and mutual understanding. She points out that men have always dominated Islamic theology and jurisprudence and thus Islam moved towards rigidity and fundamentalism.

²⁹ Ibid., 276.

³⁰ Najma Chowdhury, “Women in Politics: Impact of Religion on Women’s Participation – The Case of Bangladesh,” in Swarup HemLata and Bisaria Sarojini (eds.), *Women Politics and Religion*, Delhi: Aditya, 1991, 125-144.

Najma Chowdhury argues that in Bangladesh, the Jamaat-i-Islami is a fundamentalist political party whose objective is to establish an Islamic way of life and it believes in a rigid interpretation of Islam. The Jamaat-i-Islami believes public-private dichotomy and therefore, women should be in the private world. It also believes in the mandatory rigid purda system for all women. She claims that government uses Islamic symbolism, but it is not a fundamentalist country. Women's inferior status in the society, lack of mobility, and sufficient money hinder women's political participation. She points out that religious conservatism and religious values restrict women's participation in Bangladesh politics. She argues that the liberal aspect of Islam is not recognized and suppressed by the people of Bangladesh.

In Islamic religious ideology three different dimensions of a woman's existence in society may be discerned, i.e. glory as a mother, equal status with men as well as some significant dependence on men. The provisions regarding dependence have gained ascendancy and given rise to the traditional religious views regarding women's inferior and dependant status in society and have shaped the cultural norms and values regarding women.³¹

She proposes that dogmatic and traditional religious attitudes towards women should be changed. She writes that attitudinal change towards women's equality and removing structural inequality is essential. However, she does not explain how structural inequality can be removed from within the liberal ideology of Islam.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 141-142.

Dilara Chowdhury and Dilara and Al Masud³² observe that women who are elected came from well-connected political families and they had kinship relationship with powerful party leaders. They find that women's participation in the cabinet is low and women ministers are employed in the feminine or soft issues areas. Dilara Chowdhury notes, "Such powerlessness of women politicians demonstrates a correlation between the weak status of women in the political party, electoral constituency or parliament and even more weak representation in the councils of minister."³³ She notes that the absence of internal democratization inside party increases women's vulnerability within the political party. The major political parties in Bangladesh are not democratic in composition. In almost every party, the president enjoys absolute power. He/she can take any action. The local branches of different political parties have no decision-making role. They note that women's lack of party status and networking, access to information, and resources restrict their participation. Non-cooperation of family and lack of mobility, unsatisfactory communication system, deteriorating law and order situation and religious misinterpretation are other important factors, which hinder women's participation. Dilara Chowdhury concludes that government initiatives to include WID (Women in Development) approach in the development plan and NGO activities will encourage women's political participation.

Hussain and Hasanuzzaman use a Marxist feminist framework to identify the capitalist–democratic and patriarchal discourse of Bangladesh state as being responsible

³² Dilara Chowdhury, "Women's Participation in the Formal Structure and Decision-Making Bodies in Bangladesh," in Roushan Jahan et al. (eds), *Empowerment of Women Nairobi To Beijing (1985-1995)*, Dhaka: Women for Women, 1995, 1-28. Dilara Chowdhury and Al Masud Hasanuzzaman, "Political Decision-making in Bangladesh and the Role of Women," *Asian Profile*, 25:1, February 1997, 53-69.

³³ Dilara Chowdhury, "Women's Participation in the Formal Structure and Decision-Making Bodies in Bangladesh," 13.

for the inferior status of women in politics. They observe that legislative, electoral, and party processes in Bangladesh are responsible for the exclusion of women and their interests. To establish equal rights between men and women is not possible due to the discriminatory state discourse. The writers point out, “The capitalist-democratic and patriarchal discourses guide the formation of Bangladesh state. These discourses exercise control over women and these are the discourses of the ruling class who appear to be capital biased, elite biased and male biased.”³⁴

The writers argue that women play a secondary role in the parliament. Directly elected women parliamentarians have higher status, but they do not speak much about women’s issues. Women leaders want to establish themselves as a leader of the country and they do not want to speak about women, which is a marginal issue. They recommend that direct election of women should be introduced in the reserved seats of women, but if directly elected women do not speak about women’s issues, how can introduction of direct election for women in the reserved seats bring “qualitative changes” towards women’s empowerment? Moreover, Bangladesh is a class-based society. Women who come to politics are mainly upper class women. Bangladesh failed to involve middle class or lower class women in the politics. One study shows that women parliamentarians came from urban, affluent socio-economic background.³⁵ How would these upper class women serve the interest of middle and lower class women of Bangladesh? How would urban

³⁴ Naseem A. Hussain and Al Masud Hasanuzzaman, “Women in the Legislature in Bangladesh,” *Asian Studies*, 17, June 1998, 74.

³⁵ Dilara Chowdhury, and Al Masud Hasanuzzaman, “Political Decision Making in Bangladesh and the Role of Women,” 59.

women represent the village women of Bangladesh?³⁶ The authors fail to address these questions. The authors' final analysis is:

Women's travel from home to legislature following patriarchal routes can be accepted for starting the journey. It cannot be goal in itself as it is only means to the goal. Women representatives should be alarmed about it so that through following patriarchal routes women can at one stage change routes in the forward journey to establish their 'alternative views'. This challenge is inevitable as gender equality is the ultimate goal.³⁷

Here the writers did not explain what the 'alternative views' are. How can women establish the alternative views? How women can change the patriarchal routes within this structure, which the authors describe as capital biased, elite biased and male biased- is not clear here. How would gender equality be achieved?

Shawkat Ara³⁸ argues that lack of proper evaluation of women workers in the party, absence of strong networking of women within the party, family involvement, law and order situation, lack of access to black money and muscle power, and religious misinterpretation hinder women's participation in Bangladesh. The author only mentions the problems, but does not analyze them. She proposes that major political parties should have clear programs for the empowerment of women. She points out that political parties should express clearly their commitment to removing the discrimination of women. She did not explain why political parties in Bangladesh do not express clearly their commitment to women.

³⁶ Eighty percent people live in the villages of Bangladesh.

³⁷ Naseem A. Hussain and Al Masud Hasanuzzaman, "Women in the Legislature in Bangladesh," 87.

³⁸ Shawkat Ara Husain, "Women's Participation in Electoral Politics," *Empowerment*, 7, 2000, 67-82.

After carefully reviewing the above scholarly literature, it has become evident that no empirical study on women's political participation in Bangladesh has been done. Only one article uses a Marxist feminist framework to identify the capitalist-democratic and patriarchal discourse as the main problem in women's political participation in Bangladesh. The other writers identify two categories of factors, which hinder women's political participation in Bangladesh. The first category involves culture, which consists of the purda system, religious conservatism, religious misinterpretation, and non-cooperation of family. The second category involves lack of political institutionalization. Weak party institutionalization and weak state institutionalization are the main factors that hinder women's political participation in Bangladesh. Weak party institutionalization involves lack of networking, access to information and resources, lack of internal democratization inside the political parties. Weak state institutionalization involves massive use of black money and muscle power in politics, deteriorating law and order situation. In this context my thesis is an empirical study based on interviews, which deals with the problems of women's political participation in Bangladesh politics. It will be argued in this thesis that patriarchy and lack of institutionalization are the main problems in women's political participation in Bangladesh.

Chapter 3

Institutionalizing Democracy in Bangladesh?

Bangladesh: An Overview

Bangladesh is situated in South Asia, surrounded by Indian territory except for a short south-eastern frontier with Myanmar and a southern coast fronting the Bay of Bengal. It is one of the densely populated countries of the world with a population of 131.5 million in an area of 1,47,570 square kilometers. The density of population is 882.3 per square kilometers, which is the highest in the world.¹ About 95% people speak Bengali, the state language. About 82% people live in rural areas. There are also tribal people in Bangladesh. Main tribal groups are Chakmas, Marmas, Tipperas, and Mros. Approximately 600,000 Biharis (Urdu-speaking, non Bengali Muslims) also live in Bangladesh.²

Family and kinship are the core of social life in Bangladesh. Patrilineal ties dominate the ideology of family life. Marriage generally is made between families of similar standing. The gap between the rich and poor is much wider. The bottom ten percent of population control less than two percent of national income, the top ten percent controls more than forty percent of it that is twenty times more than the former.³

More than 85% of the people are Muslims and there are also Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is not a fundamentalist country; it is a moderate Muslim country. Although there are some evidences of *fatwa* (religious edicts) where women are clearly victimized. The *salish* or village arbitration council is a

¹ *The Europa World Year Book 2002*, 635-642.

² [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+bd0007\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+bd0007))

³ Shamim Ahsan, "Remove the Road Blocks to Progress?" *Star Weekend Magazine*, 1: 147, March 26, 2004.

traditional institution of conflict resolution through mediation which is not recognized by the state. The *shalish* council is composed of village elites. In the cases of marriage, divorce, rape or extra marital relationship, the village elites use the religious leaders to say the verdict according to Islamic law. The little learned religious leaders of the villages misinterpret the Islamic law and give verdicts in the *shalish*, which mostly go against women. The newspaper published forty-three incidences of *fatwa* from 1993-1995. In 1996 this number was thirteen. In 1997, 1998, 1999 these numbers were 27, 30, and 27 respectively. Twenty-two incidences of *fatwa* occurred till October 2000.⁴ In 2001 the High Court ruled that any *fatwa* (religious edicts) or 'legal opinion' not given by a court is unauthorized and illegal.⁵

Bangladesh was one of the first developing countries to establish a Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1978. Islam plays a very important role in society and politics. People want to see using some religious symbols at the state level. The top women leaders of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia have to follow the Islamic dress code by covering their heads with sari. Many women in Bangladesh, especially in rural areas observe purdah by covering themselves with *burkha* or *chador*. Some women use scarves, *orna* or sari to cover their heads. Although many people from the East and the West believe that purdah enhances women's subordination, one study shows that *burkha* enhanced the mobility of Muslim women and it also increased their participation and visibility in social activity.⁶ A British Anthropologist finds that a pious, purda observing village woman is one of the most powerful women in her community. Gardner writes,

⁴ *Prothom Alo*, January 3, 2001

⁵ *The Daily Star*, January 2, 2001.

⁶ Shelley Feldmann and Florence E. McCarthy, "Purdah and Changing Patterns of Social Control among Rural Women in Bangladesh," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, November 1983, 953.

“She owns a large amount of land, and runs her family with a will of iron. She rather than her sons, is indisputably head of the household; there is no question that, ...she is passive and subordinate.”⁷

The majority of women workers are involved in the informal sector of the economy of Bangladesh. Within the formal sector, a large number of women work in export-oriented industries (e.g.. garments), which brings 70 percent foreign exchange.⁸ Many NGOs play an important role in poverty alleviation and the improvement of women’s socio-economic condition. It helps women in income-generating activities and wage employment. It also provides credit, training and other support.⁹ The Grameen Bank of Bangladesh is now an international model for micro credit programs to alleviate poverty. Bernasek notes, “The Bank’s poverty alleviation strategy ... is grounded in a keen awareness of the cultural context, which conditions women’s willingness and ability to respond to economic opportunities.”¹⁰ She also finds, “most women express a desire to improve their lives within the context of existing social institutions such as the family.”¹¹

Many women’s organizations have been working in promoting the interests of women since the early 1960s. The Women’s Voluntary Association, the Lionnes, the Rotary, and the Zonta Club provide humanitarian services to women. Professional and highly educated women created some women’s organization. For example, the Business and Professional Women’s Club and the Bangladesh Federation of University Women,

⁷ Cited in Taj I. Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh Beyond Subjugation and Tyranny*, New York: Palgrave, 2000, 45.

⁸ *Country Briefing Paper- Women in Bangladesh*,

http://www.adb.org/Documents/Books/Country_Briefing_Papers/Women_in_Bangladesh/default.asp

⁹ Mahmuda Rahman Khan, “Microfinance, Wage Employment and Housework: A Gender Analysis,” *Development in Practice*, 9: 4, August 1999.

¹⁰ Alexandra Bernasek, Banking on Social Change: Grameen Bank Lending to Women, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 16: 3, Spring 2003,369.

¹¹ *Ibid.*,381.

the Bangladesh Women Lawyers' Association. The leaders and members of these organizations are from the elite classes of society.¹² The Mahila Parisad (Women's Council) that developed from pro-Soviet communist party is still working with "a vague socialist inclination."¹³ Naripokkho (For Women) views women's subordination and inferior position in society as political issues. Najma Chowdhury points out, "Innovative in their approach to mobilization and interest articulation, these groups appeal to limited sectors of society."¹⁴ Women for Women – a Research and study group is involved in research, publication, networking, and advocacy to highlight the position of women and influence public policies. The Jatiyo Mahila Sangstha (National Women's Organization), which is a government-controlled organization, provides support the women related policies of government.¹⁵ Besides these the political parties have women wings, but "they mostly work as fronts or subcommittees rather than acting as pressure groups on party's main decision-making bodies."¹⁶

Taslima Nasrin, a radical feminist writer came to the limelight in 1994. Taslima was born in 1962 in Mymensing, Bangladesh. Professionally She is a physician. She is a poet, a writer and a columnist by choice. Her writings were about the plight of Bangladeshi women. Then sex became the most important issue of her writing. She attacked all religions and in particular Islam for the exploitation of women. In an interview with a Calcutta daily, *Stateman*, Taslima suggested that the Quaran should be

¹² Najma Chowdhury, "Bangladesh: Gender Issues and Politics in a Patriarchy," in Barbaba Nelson and Najma Chowdhury (eds.) *Women and Politics World Wide*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, 102.

¹³ Taj I. Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh Beyond Subjugation and Tyranny*, New York: Palgrave, 2000, 187.

¹⁴ Najma Chowdhury, "Bangladesh: Gender Issues and Politics in a Patriarchy," 102.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Dilara Chowdhury, "Women's Participation in the Formal Structure and Decision-Making Bodies in Bangladesh," in Roushan Jahan et al. (eds.), *Empowerment of Women Nairobi To Beijing (1985-1995)*, Dhaka: Women for Women, 1995, 17.

re-written to safeguard the interests of Muslim Women. Islamic groups, Secular liberal political groups, students and intellectuals demanded her arrest and trial for giving this statement against Islam. Under this circumstance Taslima Nasreen was forced to go into exile in Sweden in 1994. She received sympathy from Amnesty International and most of the western government and media.¹⁷ One scholar notes,

Many organizations were willing to fight for her rights to freedom of speech but were not willing to support her brand of ‘feminist politics’.... nor did they support her views on religion. Indeed, many in the women’s movement felt that she had gone too far too soon and that had set the movement back by several years.¹⁸

Hashmi points out about Taslima,

She may be a ‘symbol of freedom’ for the women of the world, not so in Bangladesh, as neither her admirers nor her critics in the country are willing to identify themselves with her and her ideas, for various reasons. The former are apprehensive of reprisals from the various ‘Islamic’ and ‘secular’ groups and the latter are simply averse to associating with her because of her anti –Islamic and irresponsible writing.¹⁹

The struggle for independence and the birth of Bangladesh

The origins of the modern state of Bangladesh lie in the partition of imperial India in 1947. India was divided on the basis of the two-nation theory of Muhammad Ali Jinnah,

¹⁷ Taj I. Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh Beyond Subjugation and Tyranny*, 45.

¹⁸ Meghna Guhathakurata, “Religion, Politics and Women: The Bangladesh Scenario,” *WLUML, Dossier*, 25 October, 2003, 5.

¹⁹ Taj I. Hashmi, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh Beyond Subjugation and Tyranny*, 204.

the president of the All India Muslim League. He said in the presidential speech of the Muslim League in 1940:

It is extremely difficult to appreciate why our Hindu friends fail to understand the real nature of Islam and Hinduism. They are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are in fact different and distinct social orders, and it is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality...They neither intermarry, nor interdine together and, indeed they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspects on life and of life are different. It is quite clear that Hindus and Mussalmans derive their inspirations from different sources of History. They have different epics, their heroes are different, and different episodes. Very often, the Hero of one is a foe of the other and likewise their victories and defeats overlap. To yoke together two such nations under a single state, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built up for the government of such a state.²⁰

When leaders of the Muslim League were struggling for a separate state, they emphasized religion, but they forgot regions and realities. During the pre-independent period, Bengal gave the most solid support for establishing a separate state for Muslims in the subcontinent. The Muslims of undivided Bengal were dissatisfied with the upper class Hindus of Bengal.²¹

²⁰ Cited in Khalid B. Sayeed, *The Political System of Pakistan*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967,40.

²¹ G. W. Choudhury, *The Last Days of United Pakistan*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974, 1-10.

G. W. Chowdhury writes,

Jinnah's demand for a separate state appealed to the Bengali Muslims, not so much because of the two-nation theory, but because they looked upon it as a protective wall against the wealthy and privileged Hindus. But when, with the establishment of Pakistan, they found that the privileged position of the British and the upper class Hindus had gone to the West Pakistanis, they started stressing their cultural and linguistic affinities with the Bengalis of West Bengal.²²

Soon after partition, the ruling elite of Pakistan²³ decided that Urdu would be the only state language, though the majority of people in East Pakistan spoke Bengali. One scholar notes, "The linguistic homogeneity of the Eastern wing as against diverse groups – Punjabis, Pathans, Sindhis, Baluchis, and migrants from the various parts of India of West Pakistan had placed her in a position of distinct identity."²⁴ The decision about state language alienated the Bengalis of East Pakistan, and by 1952 open confrontation started when the students of Dhaka University engaged in demonstrations which led to the killing of several of them in police firing. In 1956, the constitution of Pakistan recognized both Urdu and Bengali as state languages. A demand for autonomy was raised in East Pakistan in the early fifties when the Bengalis observed that their representation in the decision-making processes of the state was almost nil. The economic disparity between the two parts of Pakistan increased substantially by 1958. During the Ayub decade (1958-

²² *Ibid.*, 10-11.

²³ Comprising a total area of 365,529 square miles, Pakistan got two-unequal regions (East Pakistan: 55,126 square miles; West Pakistan: 310, 403 square miles). These two regions were separated by more than a thousand miles of Indian territory. In West Pakistan, there were four provinces: the Punjab, the North-West Frontier Province, Baluchistan, and Sind. The total population of East Pakistan was 41.9 million and in West Pakistan was 33.7 million in 1951. See Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1972, 10-15.

²⁴ Golam Morshed, "East Bengal Provincial Elections of March 1954 Origin of Separatist Movement in East Pakistan," in S. R. Chakravarty and Virendra Narain (eds.) *Bangladesh History and Culture*, South Asia Studies Series 12, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1986, 121.

68), Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's (Mujib) six-point demand radicalized Bengali politics, and it increased the Awami League's (AL) base of support in East Pakistan.²⁵ The six points were different from the Bengali autonomy demands of the 1950s, because they denied the right of taxation to the central government, and suggested that the two wings have the right to pursue separate trade and commercial links with foreign countries and to maintain separate accounts of their foreign-exchange earnings. The six points intended to establish a confederation, rather than a federation.²⁶ The Ayub regime adopted a suppressive policy towards the movement. In 1968, the All Parties Students Action Committee (SAC) of East Pakistan adopted an eleven-point program, which increased the support of the left, the workers and the peasants.²⁷ The suppressive policy of the government led to the spontaneous mass upsurge of 1968-69. Under the Yahya regime, in the 1970 election the Awami League won a landslide victory in East Pakistan, but the regime did not transfer power to the Awami League, which caused civil unrest in East Pakistan. On 25th March 1971, the Yahya regime opted for military solutions against the people of East Pakistan,²⁸ which led to the Liberation War of Bangladesh. After the nine-month long bloody struggle, Bangladesh achieved its independence on 16th December 1971 with the help of India.

Overview of elections in the parliament of Bangladesh

The Awami League that led Bangladesh to independence first ruled the country on the basis of 1970 election in which it won a landslide victory in East Pakistan, received all

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁸ Robert LaPorte, Jr., "Pakistan In 1971: The Disintegration Of A Nation," *Asian Survey*, 12:2, 1972, 101.

but two of the 162 seats. Table 4 shows that the first parliamentary election of Bangladesh was held in 1973 and the Awami League monopolized the first parliament with 97.7% seats. In the 1979 parliamentary election the Awami League got only 13% seats and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) dominated the parliament with 69% seats. In the 1986 and 1988 elections Jatiya Party dominated the parliament. In the 1990s the BNP and the Awami League alternated in ruling the country. In the 1991 parliamentary election the BNP secured a plurality with 46.7% seats, and the parliament was not dominated by a single party. In the 1996 parliamentary election the Awami League secured 48.7% seats. In the 2001 election the BNP won 65% seats.

| | 1973 | 1979 | 1986 | 1988 | 1991 | 1996 | 2001 |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Awami League | 97.7 | 13.0 | 25.3 | - | 29.3 | 48.7 | 19.3 |
| Bangladesh Nationalist Party | - | 69.0 | - | - | 46.7 | 38.7 | 65.0 |
| Jatiya Party | - | - | 51.0 | 83.7 | 11.7 | 10.7 | 4.7 |
| Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh | - | 6.7 | 3.3 | - | 6.0 | 1.0 | 5.7 |
| Other Parties | 0.6 | 6.0 | 9.7 | 8.0 | 5.3 | 0.6 | 3.0 |
| Independent | 1.7 | 5.3 | 10.7 | 8.3 | 1.0 | 0.3 | 2.3 |

Source: Nizam Ahmed, "From Monopoly to Competition: Party Politics in the Bangladesh Parliament (1973-2001)," *Pacific Affairs*, 76:1, 2003, 56; Bangladesh Election Commission at <http://www.bd-ec.org/election.php3>

The remainder of this chapter will cover in more detail how different political parties emerged in Bangladesh politics. I will also review the leading political personalities and important issues of Bangladesh politics.

The Mujib Regime (1973-1975)

The Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman initially ruled the country under the provisional constitution. On 16th December 1972, Bangladesh entrenched a full-fledged

constitution. The constitution provided a parliamentary form of government, multiparty system, fundamental rights and freedom of the judiciary. It incorporated four basic principles of the state: nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism. In the 1972 constitution, the citizenship of Bangladesh was defined as 'Bangalee,' and 'Bangalee' nationalism was defined as the unity and solidarity of the Bangalee nation, which derives its identity from its language and culture.²⁹

Secularism was adopted as the state ideology, and at the beginning secularism meant the non-use of religious symbols in state activities. Secular slogans i.e. joi Bangla (Victory of Bengal) were used in public meetings, and on radio and television. Religious slogans such as Allah 'hu' Akbar (God is Great) were stopped. People of Bangladesh considered the non-use of religious symbols as an anti-Muslim and pro-Indian ideology. Under pressure from the people, the government began defining secularism as giving equal status to all religions in the public life.³⁰

After liberation, opposition to the Awami League developed very quickly. Rounaq Jahan notes that the Awami League considered the left and right opposition forces of armed groups as its enemies. The Awami League decided that force would be applied to eliminate these two elements. In March 1972, Major Jalil a sector commander of the Liberation War was arrested due to his criticism of the role of the Indian Army in Bangladesh. At the end of 1972 Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) emerged as the main rival to the Awami League. JSD was composed of the dissident and radical factions of the

²⁹ For the early constitutional history of Bangladesh, see, Abul Fazl Huq, "Constitutional Development (1972-1982)," in S.R. Chakravarty and Virendra Narain (eds), *Bangladesh Domestic Politics*, Volume 2, South Asia Studies Series, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1986, 49-50; Rounaq Jahan, *Bangladesh Politics: Problems and Issues*, Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1987, p. 96; Iftekharuzzaman and Mahbubur Rahman, "Nation Building in Bangladesh: Perceptions, Problems and an Approach," in Abdul Hafiz and Abdul Rob Khan (eds.) *Nation Building in Bangladesh: Retrospect and Prospect*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of International Strategic Studies, 1986, 18.

³⁰ Rounaq Jahan, *Bangladesh Politics: Problems and Issues*, 115-116.

student and labour fronts of the Awami League. JSD also was able to attract Major Jalil.³¹ First parliamentary elections in Bangladesh were held on March 7, 1973 and the Awami League won 291 out of 300 seats. In that election, corruption, high prices, political repression, and conspiracy were issues. The Awami League, the National Awami Party (NAP-M) and Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) branded the opposition parties as agents of “US-Chinese imperialism.” The National Awami Party, Bhashani Group (NAP-B) and JSD branded the Awami League, NAP-M, and CPB as agents of “Soviet-Indian Social Imperialism.”³² From the middle of 1973, the Awami League regime was threatened by armed attack from radical leftist political parties. In September 1973 the second amendment to the constitution was passed by the parliament. It empowered the president to declare a state of emergency if, “a grave emergency exists in which the security or economic life of Bangladesh...is threatened by war or external aggression or internal disturbance.”³³ The Awami League led by Prime Minister Mujib tried to control the press by harassing journalists and editors. The government tried to close down the newspapers and weeklies of opposition political parties: Ganakantha, Holiday, Wave, and Desh Bangla.³⁴

Apart from the threat of insurgency from radical leftist parties, Bangladesh under the leadership of Prime Minister Mujib was also experiencing an economic crisis due to the global inflation of 1972. Maniruzzaman notes, “Soon after the liberation the AL government nationalized banks, insurance companies, jute, textile and sugar mills, a major portion of inland and coastal shipping, airways and foreign trade and put a ceiling

³¹ Rounaq Jahan, “Bangladesh in 1972: Nation Building In A New State,” *Asian Survey*, 13:2, 1973, 206-207.

³² Rounaq Jahan, “Bangladesh in 1973: Management of Factional Politics,” *Asian Survey*, 14:2, 1974, 127.

³³ *Ibid.*, 133.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

of Taka 2.5 million on private investment.”³⁵ In most cases the administrators of the nationalized industries were recruited from the Awami League supporters and they had no knowledge of either socialist or capitalist system or how to run an economic enterprise. Large scale smuggling of relief goods, foodstuffs, and jute to India was very much responsible for the economic crisis. The worst flood of Bangladesh in 1974 aggravated this crisis.³⁶ The government badly needed foreign aid from western and oil-rich Middle Eastern countries and so modified its socialist programs. A new investment policy was announced which increased the ceiling on domestic private investment to Taka 30 million and gave permission for foreign investment without any ceiling. It provided a 15-year moratorium on nationalization of private industries and also provided that if any industry were nationalized after that period, compensation would be given on a fair and equitable basis.³⁷

The debates over the introduction of pure socialism or a mixed economy generated factionalism among Awami League leaders. Finance Minister Tajuddin Ahmed was in favor of introducing a strict socialist economy and he opposed receiving any foreign aid from the imperialist nations. Industries Minister Sayed Nazrul Islam and Foreign Trade Minister Khondoker Mustaque Ahmed were in favour of introducing a mixed economy and tilting to the West. At first Sheikh Mujib wanted to maintain a balance between these two groups, but when the economic crisis became acute, and

³⁵ Talukder Maniruzzaman, “Bangladesh in 1974: Economic Crisis and Political Polarization,” *Asian Survey*, 15: 2, 1975, 118.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

Bangladesh desperately needed foreign aid, Sheikh Mujib started to favour the rightist factions for practical reasons.³⁸

The real threat to political and social stability emerged from the left revolutionary parties, which believed that the Bangladesh War of Independence left the revolution unfinished. Some parties believed that the next step should be class war. Others believed that the nationalist phase was incomplete, because the Awami League government allowed the economy of Bangladesh to be controlled by India, Russia, and/or the United States.³⁹ The revolutionary parties provided training to armed guerrillas with the aim of sabotaging communications, killing Awami League workers and other enemies of revolution and finally capturing power from the Awami League.⁴⁰ The growing economic crisis, destructive activities of the radical leftist political parties, the inefficiency of the Awami League to prevent violence forced Sheikh Mujib to depend on civil and military bureaucracy. The Mujib regime inducted Awami League supporters and freedom fighters into the civil service without considering the principle of merit and politicized the public bureaucracy.⁴¹

At that time the nascent Bangladesh defense force was small, unorganized and divided. In 1975 among 36,000 men in the defense force of Bangladesh, 28,000 were repatriates from West Pakistan, and the rest were from the former East Bengal Regiment and a new group who were recruited from the Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters) personnel. The senior repatriated officers felt discriminated against, because many junior

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁹ Talukder Maniruzzaman, "Bangladesh An Unfinished Revolution?," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 34:4, 1975, 903.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 907.

⁴¹ Noore Alam Siddiquee, "Bureaucratic Accountability in Bangladesh: Challenges and Limitations," *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 7:2, 1999, 98.

officers got rapid promotions and became senior to them for participating in the Independence War. The repatriated officers were conservative in their outlook but the Freedom Fighters had become highly politicized as a result of their experiences in the liberation war.⁴² The Freedom Fighters had two different views on the institutional framework of the Bangladesh defense force. One group supported the continuation of the conventional army like the British-Indian or Pakistan Armed forces. The other group favored the transformation of Bangladesh Armed Forces into a “productive Army” like the Chinese Peoples Army. Despite these ideological differences, they were all dissatisfied with the Awami League regime.⁴³

The Awami League Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib created a division of security forces called Jatio Rakkhi Bahini (National Security Army,) which would have unquestioned loyalty to the Awami League regime. This step only increased the differences and serious conflicts between the command structures of the two parallel armies, which were responsible for the deterioration of general morale of Bangladesh army personnel.⁴⁴ The members of Mujib Bahini, Kader Bahini, Mukti Bahini, and organizations affiliated with the Awami League who were specially recommended by the Awami League leaders were recruited for the Rakkhi Bahini. When the underground activities increased and mass movement by the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (the dissident radical wing of the Awami League) started, Mujib enacted an Act in January 1974, which empowered the Rakkhi Bahini to arrest any one or search any house without showing

⁴² Emajuddin Ahmed, “The August 1975 Coup D’etat,” in S.R. Chakravarty and Virendra Narain (eds) , *Bangladesh Domestic Politics*, Volume 2, South Asia Studies Series, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1986, 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁴ Zillur R. Khan, “Politicization of the Bangladesh Military: A Response to Perceived Shortcomings of Civilian Government,” *Asian Survey*, 21: 5, 1981,554.

cause. The Act also did not permit an appeal to the courts against the actions of Rakkhi Bahini officers.⁴⁵ The Bangladesh military considered the annual budget provision for them was quite slim. In successive annual budgets since 1972 about 13% of the total revenue expenditures were allocated for defense, but most of these modest allocations were spent on buying arms and ammunition for the Jatio Rakkhi Bahini. The government's plan to increase the strength of the Jatio Rakkhi Bahini from about 25,000 in 1975 to about 130,000 in 1980 and very slow recruitment to the regular armed forces created hostility among the armed forces to the Mujib government.⁴⁶

All groups of the Bangladesh Defense Services shared an anti-Indian orientation for various reasons. Maniruzzaman points out, "Almost all members of the armed forces who had belonged to the Liberation Army had the feeling that the Indian Army 'just walked into Bangladesh, when we had already finished the job,' thus robbing the Liberation Army of the glory of liberating Bangladesh."⁴⁷ There was an allegation that when the Pakistan Army surrendered in 1971, the Indian army took away all the sophisticated weapons and vehicles to India, which had been captured from the Pakistan army.⁴⁸ Many top-level army officers believed that the Jatio Rakkhi Bahini was planned and designed by the Indian army for the safety of the Mujib regime.⁴⁹ Despite grievances against the Awami League government, the defense force in Bangladesh was immobilized because of its internal divisions. When it was asked by Sheikh Mujib to

⁴⁵ Talukder Maniruzzaman, "Bangladesh in 1974: Economic Crisis and Political Polarization," 122.

⁴⁶ Zaglul Haider, "Role of Military in the Politics of Bangladesh: Mujib, Zia and Ershad Regimes (1972-1990)," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 22:3, 1999, 66.

⁴⁷ Talukder Maniruzzaman, "Bangladesh in 1975: The Fall of the Mujib Regime And its Aftermath," *Asian Survey*, 16:2, 1976, 122.

⁴⁸ Ishtiaq Hossain, "Bangladesh-India Relations: Issues and Problems," *Asian Survey*, 21:11, 1981, 1116.

⁴⁹ Emajuddin Ahmed, "The August 1975 Coup D'etat," 30.

conduct a series of successful operations to combat violence, it regained a sense of unity and cohesion and perceived that their services were essential.⁵⁰

The Awami League government declared a state of emergency on 28th December 1974 and suspended all fundamental rights conferred by the constitution for an indefinite period. On 25th January 1975, Sheikh Mujib amended the constitution and introduced a presidential form of government and one-party system. The amendment incorporated a provision that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would be the president of the country for five years from the date of the constitutional amendment. Maniruzzaman notes, “The constitutional amendment bill was passed without any reading and discussion in Parliament, since the normal rules of procedure of the house were suspended, and the whole process of amendment was completed within half an hour.”⁵¹ This authoritarian step reduced the support base of Mujib and damaged its legitimacy. The dissatisfied army took this opportunity to organize the first military coup in Bangladesh on 15th August 1975 in which President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and all his family members except his two daughters were brutally killed.

The Zia Regime (1975-1981)

In 1975 General Ziaur Rahman (popularly called Zia) came to power through coup and countercoup. Zia included “Bismillaher Rahmaner Rahim” (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent the Merciful) at the beginning of the constitution and substituted ‘secularism’ with ‘absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah.’ He introduced a multi-party system, but kept a presidential form of government. General Zia presented a new vision of Bangladeshi nationalism, and discarded the concept of Bengali nationalism. Zia and his

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵¹ Talukder Maniruzzaman, “Bangladesh in 1975: The Fall of the Mujib Regime And its Aftermath,” 120.

party spokesmen argued that Bangladeshi nationalism sharply differentiated between the Bengali-speaking people of Bangladesh and West Bengal of India. They viewed Bengali nationalism as meaning Bengalis of both Bangladesh and India. Bangladeshi nationalism would put an end to that ambiguity. Whereas Bengali nationalism emphasized linguistic identity, Bangladeshi nationalism stressed territory, people, Bengali language, culture, economic life, religion and the legacy of the 1971 Liberation War.⁵² Zia discarded the socialist economic policy of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and took special measures for privatization. The ceiling of Taka 30 million, which had been fixed by the Mujib government for private investment, was raised to Taka 100 million. Zia declared the policy of de-nationalization and a tax holiday for all new industries and home remittance of net profits by foreign companies to increase foreign investment.⁵³ Internationally Zia followed a foreign policy, which aimed at promoting Bangladesh relations with the west, particularly with the United States of America. By the 1980s the United States of America emerged as the largest donor of Bangladesh.⁵⁴ Zia encouraged, favoured, and promoted civil servants who supported him and introduced civil-military bureaucratic state.

President Zia created the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and legitimized his rule through elections. Although there were allegations of election rigging, Zia was popular among citizens for his personal integrity. Haque notes, “the people continued to have confidence in the leadership of President Zia, the soldier-turned politician who had

⁵² Zaglul Haider, “Role of Military in the Politics of Bangladesh: Mujib, Zia and Ershad Regimes (1972-1990)”, 73-74.

⁵³ Talukder Maniruzzaman, “Bangladesh In 1976: Struggle For Survival As An Independent State,” *Asian Survey*, 17:2, 1977, 198-199.

⁵⁴ Zaglul Haider, *The Changing Patterns of Bangladesh Foreign Policy: A Comparative Study of the Mujib and Zia Regimes (1971-1981)*, An Unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of Political Science, Clark Atlanta University, 1995, 401-402.

earned their support through hard work, his efforts to improve their lot, and repeated visits to the remotest corners of the country never visited before by even middle-rank bureaucrats.”⁵⁵ The BNP was comprised of people with diverse beliefs and interests. There was factionalism among bureaucrats, technocrats, and retired military personnel against politicians; socialists against non-socialists; Islamists against secularists; Freedom Fighters against non-Freedom Fighters.⁵⁶

During the Zia years from 1975 to 1981, the support base of the Awami League weakened and it experienced serious factionalism. Although the mainstream Awami League (Malek group) supported openly one-party authoritarian system, there were differences on this question among the leadership. The Razzak-Mohiuddin-Motia group supported one-party system following pro-Soviet line while the Tofail-Johra Tajuddin group favored a nonaligned foreign policy and the introduction of “collective leadership” in the party.⁵⁷ When the Awami League was about to disintegrate in 1981, Sheikh Hasina, daughter of late President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerged as a leader of her father’s political party.⁵⁸ It was assumed by the Awami League that as a daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Hasina could be the symbol of unity and take it to power by using her family’s legacy. Sheikh Hasina was a graduate of and was married to an eminent scientist of Bangladesh, Dr. M. A. Wazed Miah. As a daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina was elected as the chief of the Student's Union of Eden Girls College, the leading women's college in Bangladesh. She was a member of the

⁵⁵ Azizul Haque, “Bangladesh 1979: Cry for a Sovereign Parliament,” *Asian Survey*, 20:2, 1980, 219.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁷ Azizul Haque, “Bangladesh in 1980: Strains and Stresses- Opposition in the Doldrums,” *Asian Survey*, 21:2, 1981, 196.

⁵⁸ Nizam Ahmed, “From Monopoly to Competition: Party Politics in the Bangladesh Parliament (1973-2001),” *Pacific Affairs*, 76:1, 2003, 72.

Student's League (Chattra League) of Dhaka University and Secretary of the Chattra League Unit in Rokeya Hall. She was also the President of the Eden Intermediate Girls College Chattra League.⁵⁹ Despite these political roles she was not as active as her brothers Sheikh Kamal and Sheikh Jamal. Zillur R. Khan notes that one son of Sheikh Mujib was the chief of the Bangladesh Sports Federation and the other son was expected to get a top position in the Army.⁶⁰ On 15th August 1975, when her father and all her family members were brutally killed, Sheikh Hasina was basically a housewife, living in West Germany with her husband. Her sister Sheikh Rehana was in West Germany visiting them. Thus the two sisters of the Mujib family escaped the conspiracy to eliminate the entire family. After that incident Hasina was forced to live in exile. Sheikh Hasina was unanimously elected the president of the Awami League in 1981 while she was still in exile. Ending six years in exile she returned to Bangladesh on May 17, 1981 during the Zia regime.⁶¹

In order to consolidate his power Zia relied on the repatriated and newly recruited officers and soldiers. Over 400 officers were executed during his regime.⁶² In 1981, 15% of the members of the armed forces were Freedom Fighters, 25% were repatriated from Pakistan, and 60% were new recruits.⁶³ The Freedom Fighters in the army wanted to capture power and they had led the previous coup attempts against Zia. Zia appointed General Ershad - a repatriated army officer as the Chief of Army Staff. General Monzur - a Freedom Fighter and very close friend of Zia, expected this position. Zia's decision

⁵⁹ <http://www.virtualbangladesh.com/biography/hasina.html>

⁶⁰ Zillur R. Khan, "From Mujib to Zia Elite Politics in Bangladesh," in Rafiuddin Ahmed ed., *Religion, Nationalism, And Politics in Bangladesh*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1990, 55.

⁶¹ <http://www.virtualbangladesh.com/biography/hasina.html>

⁶² Peter J. Bertocci, "Bangladesh in the Early 1980s: Praetorian Politics in an Intermediate Regime," *Asian Survey*, 22:10, 1982, 996.

⁶³ Syed Serajul Islam, "The State in Bangladesh Under Zia (1975-81)," *Asian Survey*, 24:5, 1984, 572.

caused their friendship to deteriorate their personal relations, and in March 1981 General Monzur led an abortive military coup in which President Ziaur Rahman was killed.⁶⁴ The army killed later General Monzur before producing him to the court of law, which was unclear to the whole nation.

The Ershad Regime (1982-1990)

Following the assassination of Ziaur Rahman, Vice President Justice Abdus Sattar succeeded to the office of the presidency and elected as the president on November 15, 1981. But Sattar's rule lasted for a short period of only four months. On March 24, 1982 General H. M. Ershad came to power through a bloodless coup. Ershad retained the presidential form of government and followed the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism introduced by Zia and emphasized Islamic values. Ershad said that Bangladeshis formed a separate and distinct entity, identity, religion, culture, history, heritage and common hopes and aspirations. These he said, were the ingredients of Bangladeshi nationalism.⁶⁵ In an apparent attempt to gain popularity he made 'Islam' the state religion of Bangladesh. Ershad followed a market-oriented economic policy, which was prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and donors.⁶⁶ Like Zia, Ershad also created a political party called Jatiya Party (JP) and tried to civilianize his regime. Despite his assiduous attempts at civilianization, Ershad was not successful in turning himself into a democrat, but only in establishing his authority as a dictator. Lack of

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 571-572.

⁶⁵ M.G. Kabir, "Post-1971 Nationalism in Bangladesh: Search for a New Identity," in M. Abdul Hafiz and Abdur Rob Khan (eds.) *Nation Building in Bangladesh: Retrospect and Prospect*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, 1986, 57.

⁶⁶ Bhuian Monoar Kabir, "Politico-Economic Limitations And The Fall Of The Military-Authoritarian Government In Bangladesh," *Armed Forces & Society*, 21:4, 1995, 553.

participation by the major political parties and continuous malpractice and rigging in the elections not only eroded his credibility, but also seriously wrecked democratic institutions. Another outcome of Ershad's rule was that people at large lost confidence in the election mechanism. Ershad also politicized bureaucracy by favoring the civil servants who supported him.

In the mean time, Khaleda Zia, widow of late President Ziaur Rahman emerged as a leader of the BNP as a symbol of the unity of the party. She passed the matriculation examinations in 1960, and the same year, she married Ziaur Rahman of Bogra, then a captain in the Pakistan Army. She was seen accompanying her husband on public and ceremonial occasions. Yet she had remained a shy housewife who spent most of her time raising her two sons. In March 1983, Justice Sattar appointed Khaleda Zia a vice-chairman of the BNP. On February 1984, she became the chairperson as Justice Sattar retired from politics.⁶⁷ Both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia played major roles in the 1990 mass upheaval against Ershad and he was forced to resign. Ershad handed over power to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, who was a consensus candidate of all opposition political parties on 6th December 1990. All opposition political parties gave a mandate to hold free and fair parliamentary elections within three months of his assuming office. The fifth parliamentary election was held under Justice Shabuddin Ahmed on 27th February 1991.

Return to Democracy

Which is the best form of government - presidential or parliamentary? This question was the most controversial and debated issue in the 1991 parliamentary election. The election

⁶⁷ <http://www.virtualbangladesh.com/biography/khaleda.html>

manifesto of the Awami League pledged to establish a parliamentary form of government.⁶⁸ On the other hand, BNP leader Khaleda Zia said, “Parliament will decide the form of government. But still it requires referendum.”⁶⁹ In the 1991 election secularism versus “absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah” was the next most debated issue. The Awami League declared that it would re-establish secularism as it was stated in the original 1972 constitution. The BNP declared that it would not return to the 1972 constitution. Khaleda Zia said, “We do not want to establish impiety in the name of secularism. We want to ensure the equal rights of people of all religions.”⁷⁰ An eight-party alliance led by Awami League declared that it did not oppose keeping Bismillaher Rahmaner Rahim in the constitution.⁷¹ In a meeting Sheikh Hasina said, “There is no hostility between secularism and Bismillah. Secularism does not mean impiety; rather it is the essence of Islam. In Islam the principle of secularism is against ultra-communalism. We are God fearing people, but not fanatic.”⁷²

The two major political parties also clashed on nationalism. The Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina said, “Bengali nationhood was the source of our Liberation War. Therefore, the citizenship can be Bangladeshi, but the nationalism cannot be Bangladeshi.”⁷³ The leader of the BNP Khaleda Zia said, “Hindu-Muslim-Christian, we all fought for independence. We are not Bengali. Our identity is Bangladeshi.”⁷⁴ Baxter and Rahman note, “Bangladesh-India relations became a factor in the campaigning as the

⁶⁸ *The Daily Ittefaq*, February 7, 1991

⁶⁹ *The Daily Ittefaq*, January 29, 1991.

⁷⁰ *The Daily Ittefaq*, January 4, 1991.

⁷¹ *The Daily Ittefaq*, January 8, 1991.

⁷² *The Daily Ittefaq*, February 9, 1991.

⁷³ *The Daily Ittefaq*, January 27, 1991.

⁷⁴ *The Daily Ittefaq*, February 26, 1991.

BNP and some other parties accused the AL of being pro-India.”⁷⁵ The Awami League campaign was based largely on Mujib’s legacy and the promise to punish his assassins while BNP campaign included Zia’s 19-point program that incorporates rural development, industrialization, population control, health delivery and education.

Following the election, the BNP headed by Khaleda Zia formed the government with the support of Jamaat-i-Islami, Bangladesh (JIB). The government continued the free-market economic policy.⁷⁶ The Khaleda administration shifted the form of government from a presidential to a parliamentary one responding to public opinion. Although the BNP was in favour of continuing the presidential system, Baxter writes, “it was the close popular vote in the 1991 election that shifted BNP opinion on this issue.”⁷⁷ Khaleda Zia moved the 12th amendment bill of the constitution in the parliament. This was passed in the parliament in accordance with the consensus of both government and the opposition parties.⁷⁸ The politicization of bureaucracy continued during the Khaleda regime (1991-1996), hundreds of bureaucrats were promoted to middle level and senior positions based on political consideration.⁷⁹

The crisis started after a by-election in which the ruling BNP was alleged to have rigged the voting in March 1994. The opposition demanded the constitutional amendment for the provision that parliamentary elections should be held under a caretaker government. The opposition members boycotted the parliament, called a series of nationwide hartal (general strike). When they were unsuccessful, all 147 opposition

⁷⁵ Craig Baxter and Syedur Rahman, “Bangladesh Votes-1991: Building Democratic Institution,” *Asian Survey*, 31: 8, 1991, 686.

⁷⁶ Craig Baxter, “Bangladesh in 1991 A Parliamentary System,” *Asian Survey*, 32: 2, 1992, 166-167.

⁷⁷ Craig Baxter, “Bangladesh: Can Democracy Survive?,” *Current History*, April 1996, 183.

⁷⁸ Zaglul Haider, “The Controversial Sixth General Election in Bangladesh and its Aftermath,” *Rajshahi University Studies*, Part-C, 5, 1997, 93.

⁷⁹ Noore Alam Siddiquee, “Bureaucratic Accountability in Bangladesh: Challenges and Limitations,” 98.

members resigned from the parliament on December 28, 1994. The BNP government dissolved the parliament in November 1995, and despite the oppositions' boycott the BNP government held the 6th parliamentary election on February 15, 1996.⁸⁰ The opposition political parties boycotted the 6th general election saying that under a partisan government no election can be held free and fair. In the absence of the participation of opposition political parties, the 6th general election lost its credibility. Against this backdrop, the BNP government passed the 13th amendment bill on March 26, 1996 incorporating the provision for a caretaker government in the constitution.⁸¹ The 13th amendment of the constitution says, "there shall be a non-party caretaker government during the period from the date on which the Chief Advisor of such government enters upon office after Parliament is dissolved or stands dissolved by reason of expiration of its term till the date on which a new Prime Minister enters upon his office after the constitution of Parliament."⁸² It further says, "the Non-party care-taker government shall consist of the Chief Advisor at its head and not more than ten other Advisors, all of whom shall be appointed by the president. The president shall appoint as Chief Advisor the person who among the retired Chief Justices of Bangladesh retired last."⁸³

Under the caretaker government of Justice Habibur Rahman, the 7th parliamentary election was held in June 1996. In this election the BNP followed a negative campaign, attacking the Awami League as authoritarian, politically inefficient, and biased towards India.⁸⁴ The Awami League did not pledge to return to the 1972 constitution and establish

⁸⁰ Stanley A. Kochanek, "Bangladesh in 1996 The 25th Year of Independence," *Asian Survey*, 37:2 . 1997, 136-137.

⁸¹ Gyasuddin Molla "South Asian Experience of a New Model of 'Caretaker Govt' in a Parliamentary Framework," *Regional Studies*, 20:2. 2002,106.

⁸² *The Constitution Of The People's Republic Of Bangladesh*, 19.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁴ Stanley A. Kochanek, "Bangladesh in 1996 The 25th Year of Independence," 139.

secularism. Kochanek says about the Awami League campaign, “Since AL leader Sheikh Hasina Wajid’s arrogance had been a primary factor in her defeat in 1991, the AL campaign was much more humble and positive. Hasina sought to diffuse the BNP attack by apologizing for any mistakes made by her father’s 1972-75 AL government and declaring that she would not renew the 25-year treaty of friendship and cooperation in India.”⁸⁵ The Awami League won the election and Sheikh Hasina became the prime minister.

Although ideologically the Awami League believed in socialism, it changed its manifesto and adopted a free-market economic policy since 1992.⁸⁶ During the Hasina regime, violent crime, corruption, unauthorized occupation of state owned land, capture of private properties through force, and politicization of the bureaucracy alienated general people from her government.⁸⁷ The Hasina regime (1996-2001) appointed one senior bureaucrat as a cabinet member to reward him for his role in the movement against the Khaleda Zia government.⁸⁸

In the 2001 parliamentary election the BNP and its three coalition partners secured a two-thirds majority and Khaleda Zia again formed the government.⁸⁹ The

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p.139; A 25-year treaty of friendship, cooperation and peace was signed between India and Bangladesh with a provision of renewal . It was signed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Mrs. Indira Gandhi on March 17, 1972, See, Zaglul Haider, *The Changing Patterns of Bangladesh Foreign Policy: A Comparative Study of the Mujib and Zia Regimes (1971-1981)*, 82.

⁸⁶ Nizam Ahmed, “From Monopoly to Competition: Party Politics in the Bangladesh Parliament (1973-2001),” 60.

⁸⁷ M. Rashiduzzaman, “Bangladesh in 2000 Searching for Better Governance,” *Asian Survey*, 41: 1, 2001, 124.

⁸⁸ Noore Alam Siddiquee, “Bureaucratic Accountability in Bangladesh: Challenges and Limitations,” 98.

⁸⁹ http://www.discoverybangladesh.com/meetbangladesh/quicklook_eco.html; In Bangladesh, 56% of the economically active population is engaged in agriculture. The principal sources of revenue in the agricultural sector are jute, tea, shrimps and fish. The gross national product (GNP) is \$380 per head. Among the working population 9.6% are employed in industrial sector (including mining, manufacturing, power and construction). In 2000, 25.1% of total GDP came from the industrial sector. At the end of 2000, Bangladesh had reserves of natural gas totaled 300,000m.cum. It is expected that Bangladesh can export its surplus of natural gas in the near future. In 2000 manufacturing contributed 15.4% of GDP (*The Europa*

present government is also committed to a market economy and has been pursuing policies to encourage private investment. Khan describes regarding the politicization of public bureaucracy of the present Khaleda Zia government,

The present government moved swiftly to 'cleanse' the civil service of past governments' supporters. A number of actions were initiated. Between October 2001 and January 2002, 2000 officials from civil, defense, police, ansar (civil defense force) and other services were transferred. The present government has created a record by making 350 officials an officer on special duty (OSD). It has been reported that an unofficial cell of three former and two incumbent secretaries prepared lists of officials for transfer or sacking with the consent of the Prime Minister's Office. This lists were prepared on the basis of a number of criteria that included those who had served as field level officials (DC, SP, UNO, and OC) between 1996 and 2001, those who had served under different ministers of the AL, those who were actively involved in AL politics during student days, and those who had benefited 'unduly' during AL rule.

The Khaleda administration maintains very close linkage with the West particularly with the United States because of its increasing dependence on foreign aid. The main objective of the foreign policy of the Khaleda Zia government is to ensure national security within a stable regional context, to project the image of Bangladesh as a

World Year Book 2002, 1, 640-641). Bangladesh is heavily burdened with debt. Since independence in 1971, the country has received US\$ 36 billion (<http://www.oneworld.net/article/archive/4917>) In 1999/2000 the total disbursed foreign aid was US\$1575m (*The Europa World Year Book 2002*, 641). The domestic debt was 34.51% in 2000-01. The trade deficit for 1999-2000 was \$2.64 billion. (See, M. Rashiduzzaman, Bangladesh in 2001, The Election and a New Political Reality?" (*Asian Survey*, 42:1, 2002, 191). Foreign exchange reserves were low and it was \$1.75 billion in 2002. (Rounaq Jahan, "Bangladesh in 2002 Imperiled Democracy," *Asian Survey*, 43:1, 2003, 227)

responsible peace-loving country, and to depict Bangladesh as a moderate Muslim country.⁹⁰ The U.S ambassador to Bangladesh has called it a moderate Muslim nation.⁹¹

Despite the prevailing notion that women should be excluded from politics, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia emerged as leaders through using the family legacies due to the low level of political institutionalization.

⁹⁰ Press Briefing by Hon'ble Foreign Minister's at the New Year 2 January 2003, (<http://www.mofabd.org/press/briefing020103.htm>)

⁹¹ Rounaq Jahan, "Bangladesh in 2002 Imperiled Democracy," 228.

Chapter 4

Socio-political Background of Women Members of the 7th Parliament (1996-2001) of Bangladesh

Of the twenty-three women parliamentarians interviewed, twenty were indirectly elected in the reserved seats and three were directly elected. Nineteen were from the Awami League, two from the BNP and two from the Jatiya Party. Among the directly elected respondents, two won the parliament seats through by-elections. Their husbands had won two seats and according to the constitution of Bangladesh, were required to give up one seat.¹ These two women contested the by-elections to retain the seats of their husbands. One was from the BNP and the other from the Jatiya Party. In the 7th parliament Awami League bagged 27 seats of the 30 reserved seats and gave the remaining three seats to Jatiya Party, which was the coalition partner of the Awami League government.²

Table 4 displays the educational background of the twenty-three female members of the 7th parliament. It shows that one had Secondary School Certificate (S.S.C.), one had Higher Secondary Certificate (H.S.C.), and nine had Bachelors degrees. The remaining twelve had Master degree. Moreover, three had degrees in education and three had Bachelor of Law degrees. One was a Bar-at-law. Among twenty-three respondents only one was unmarried.

Husbands of eight respondents had Bachelors degrees, thirteen had Masters and one had a Ph.D. degree. In regard to fathers' education, one woman member's father had

¹ Article 71(1) of the Bangladesh constitution says, "No person shall at the same time be a member of Parliament in respect of two or more constituencies."

² *The Bangladesh Observer*, July 3, 1996.

class 1-V educational background, two had S.S.C, five had H.S.C, thirteen had Bachelor degree and two had Masters degree. Mother of one woman member was illiterate, two mothers had no formal education, but they knew how to read and write. Eight mothers had class 1-V, eleven had class VI- X educational background. Only one female member's mother had H.S.C. level education.

| Level of education | Women members | Fathers of women members | Mothers of women members | Husbands of women members |
|--------------------|---------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Illiterate | | | 1 | |
| Literate | | | 2 | |
| Class 1-V | | 1 | 8 | |
| Class VI-X | | | 11 | |
| S.S.C | 1 | 2 | | |
| H.S.C | 1 | 5 | 1 | |
| Bachelor | 9 | 13 | | 8 |
| Masters | 12 | 2 | | 13 |
| PhD | | | | 1 |
| Total | 23 | 23 | 23 | |

Table 4 demonstrates that most female members of the 7th parliament and their husbands were highly educated and they had equivalent levels of education. Fathers of most female members had Bachelors degrees. This study unveils the fact that the fathers' level of education was higher than that of the mothers. Fathers of most female MPs had Bachelor degree while most mothers had VI-X class education. In Bangladesh the literacy rate of population 5 years and above is 45.1%, while male literacy rate is 48.2% and female is 39.6%.³ Table 5 shows that among the university students, only 23.9% are female.

³ Statistical Pocketbook of Bangladesh 2000, 351.

| Table 5: Percentage of female students by level of education | |
|---|-------------------|
| Level | Female percentage |
| Primary | 47.3 |
| Secondary | 45.2 |
| College | 33.8 |
| University | 23.9 |

Source: Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh, 1999 pp. 528, 518, 506, 494.

Table 6 shows the occupational background of the twenty-three female parliamentarians. Nine were teachers (four were in School and five in Colleges), three were social workers, one was a lawyer, four were business owners, three were NGO workers and one was a banker and two were housewives. Thus most women members of the 7th parliament were in teaching profession and few of them were housewives. The Labour Force Survey 1995-96 shows that 18.1 percent women of ten years and above are employed compared to 77 for men. From 1989 on, the Labour Force Survey of Bangladesh accepted a new broader definition of employment. Activities like caring for domestic animals and poultry, threshing, boiling, drying and husking crops, processing and preserving food etc. were included in the category of employed persons. According to this broad definition the participation of female in employment rose from 18.1% to 50.6% and the rate of participation of male stayed the same.⁴ While the labour force survey shows the low participation of women in Bangladesh, most of the female members of the 7th parliament were working women.

Among the husbands, one was a Chartered Accountant and another was a bar-at-law. Husbands of five women members were lawyers, three teachers, four were

⁴ Pratima Paul Majumder, *Jatyio Bajete Narir Angsho*, Bangladesh Nari Pragati Shangha, Dhaka: 2001, 27.

employed in administrative and managerial jobs, eight were businessmen and two were in other professions (one was an Artist and one was an army officer). All mothers of women members were housewives. This is not surprising because women of Bangladesh have only recently become involved in paid employment. It also demonstrates that most husbands of female members were in business. They were also engaged in politics. Profession of women parliamentarians' fathers shows that ten were in administrative and managerial jobs, two were teachers, two lawyers, six business owner, and three were in other professions (one was a journalist and one landlord, one was a homeopathic doctor). These results show that women parliamentarians were the exclusively elite class in terms of their family's educational and occupational background. In the context of Bangladesh where about 49 percent of total people live below the poverty line, these women are exceptionally privileged.

| Occupation | Women members | Fathers of Women members | Mothers of Women members | Husbands of Women members |
|-------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Administrative and managerial | | 10 | | 4 |
| Teaching | 9 | 2 | | 3 |
| Business | 4 | 6 | | 8 |
| Lawyer | 1 | 2 | | 5 |
| Social Work | 3 | | | |
| Housewife | 2 | | 23 | |
| Others | 4 | 3 | | 2 |
| Total | 23 | 23 | 23 | 22 |

Are educational and professional qualifications of women members sufficient for running their office? Surely political experience is important to run the office. Out of twenty women parliamentarians fifteen had no political experience before being elected as members of the parliament. Among them, fourteen were nominated due to the connections of their husbands and one in recognition of her father's contribution,

dedication, and martyrdom for the politics of the Awami League. Three of them got selection to reduce the grievance of their husbands, because the latter had been denied nomination in the parliamentary election of 1996. Two were elected in the by-elections to retain the seats of their husbands. Among them one was from the BNP who did not participate in any public meeting before election. Her husband did all the election campaigning on behalf of that woman parliamentarian. The other member elected in the by-election from the Jatiya Party commented, "I got the power on a "golden plate." I did not do any work. People voted me for the popularity of my husband."

Eight respondents had political experience. Among them four were involved in politics from their student life. One of them was selected as party whip by the majority party. Another started politics in 1966 when she was a student at Dhaka University. After marriage she gave up politics because her husband did not approve of it. Again in 1991 she joined in politics. In 1996 her husband received the nomination but was not elected. She tried her best for the election campaign of her husband. Her campaigning impressed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and she rewarded her by giving nomination for a reserved seat in the parliament. One woman member has been doing politics since 1968. Her husband was an active member of the Awami League. After marriage her husband encouraged her to do the politics of the Awami League and she involved with the *Chattra League* (Student wing of the Awami League). She participated in the mass movement of 1969 and received training as a Freedom Fighter in 1971.

One woman member entered politics in 1961 when she was a college student with her father's encouragement. Another woman member was a sister-in-law of the late President Ziaur Rahman, and she entered politics with her sister Prime Minister Khaleda

Zia after the assassination of Ziaur Rahman. She was elected directly to the general seat of the 7th parliament. One woman member was a leader of the Jatiya Sramik League (Labour wing of the Awami League), and she became involved in politics after the death of her husband. She contested the parliamentary elections of 1986 and 1991 but did not win as a result of the tricky devices of her own party. Another woman member had a little experience in politics. She was a polling agent in an election in the British period and took part in the language movement of 1952. The Awami League gave her nomination due to the identity of her husband with this party. Another respondent was a lawyer who felt that her main business was to deal with the people and politics would give her additional opportunity to interact with the people. This consideration helped her to come into politics.

This picture reveals that women parliamentarians were the exclusively elite class in terms of their family's educational and occupational background. These qualifications are not sufficient to hold public office. They should have sufficient political experience. Most women members of the 7th parliament had no political experience and became the members of the parliament due to their family connections. Most women who had experience also received nomination due to their family connections. It is generally assumed that directly elected women members are more politically experienced, but in Bangladesh we find that generally women become elected directly to retain their husbands' seats in the by-elections, or after their husbands' death, they contest the by-elections to win their deceased husbands' seats. In August 2003, Khadiza Amin contested the by-election after the death of her husband and she won the seat. After winning the election Khadiza Amin commented, "My first duty is to work for the development of my

constituency and to complete my husband's unfinished work. My husband's ideology is my crown and I will try to serve the people with this ideology."⁵

⁵ *Prothom Alo*, August 23, 2003.

Chapter 5

Reserved Seats for Women in the Parliament of Bangladesh

Article 28 (2) of the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh that came into effect on 16th December 1972 declares that women shall have rights equal to those of men in all spheres of the state and public life. In order to ensure a minimum representation of women in the parliament or *Jatiyo Sangsad*, the constitution provided for the provision of fifteen reserved seats. Ziaur Rahman enlarged the number of reserved seats for women to thirty in 1979. Under article 65 of the constitution, the parliament consists of 300 members. The members are elected from single territorial constituencies by direct election. In addition, thirty seats were reserved for women to be indirectly elected by the directly elected members of the parliament. This provision did not deprive women of their electoral right to contest the elections from general constituencies as independent or political party candidates. The provision of reserved seats ceased to be operative in December 1987, but was re-enacted into the constitution in June 1990 by the 10th Amendment of Bangladesh Constitution.¹ Again it expired in April 4, 2001.

The thirty reserved seats for women always went to the majority party. In the 5th parliament, the BNP was in need of support from the Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh to attain majority in the parliament. The BNP relinquished two reserved seats to the Jamaat-i-Islami. Twenty-eight of the thirty reserved seats for women went to the members of the BNP, and the Jamaat-i-Islami members occupied the remaining two seats. In the 7th parliament the Awami League won twenty-seven reserved seats and gave the remaining

¹ Najma Chowdhury, "Women in Politics," *Empowerment*, 1, 1994, 40.

three seats to the Jatiya Party, which was the coalition partner of the Awami League government.²

During the 7th Parliament, although both the Awami League and the BNP showed interest in women's political empowerment and power sharing, the general impression was that both parties wanted to continue the previous system of reserved seats despite the fact that neither party was able to increase women's effective representation.³ The thirty indirectly elected women members had no permanent constituencies. There was no assurance that they would be elected again from the same area or would be elected at all. The areas they represented were too wide. The local and district administrations were also reluctant to involve them the way they involved male parliamentarians.⁴

The opinions of the female members of the 7th parliament also revealed that the majority of them were in favour of the continuation of the previous system. Out of nineteen respondents from the Awami League, eleven were in favour of retaining the thirty reserved seats for women elected by the members of parliament. Among the supporters of the previous system one Awami League female member said, "The system of thirty reserved seats should be continued. Otherwise, parliament will be without woman." Another respondent pointed out, "If the system of the thirty reserved seats does not continue, government will fall again and again like India, and the Jatiya Party will be the decision-maker, because in the 7th parliamentary election there was not much

² *The Bangladesh Observer*, July 3, 1996.

³ Dilara Chowdhury, "The politics of Women's Representation in the National Legislature," *The Daily Star*, September 30, 2000.

⁴ Rabia Bhuiyan, "The Representation Of Women's Issues In The Parliamentary Committee system," Paper read in a conference on "Comparative Constitutional Law: Parliamentary Committee Systems", 27-28 May 1999, UNDP, 5.

difference in the number of seats between the AL and the BNP.”⁵ In the parliamentary system if any party does not win majority seats, then competition starts among the contending big parties to form the government with the support of other small parties. In this process the big parties always want to break the unity of coalition government and try to pick up the support of small parties and thus government fall again and again. As the thirty reserved seats always went to the majority party, in Bangladesh these seats helped the BNP and the Awami League to win the majority seats in the parliament. Therefore, this woman parliamentarian wanted to continue the thirty reserved seats to use women for partisan political purpose, not for the empowerment of women. One respondent said, “Women members of the parliament are not political; they always gossip in the lobby of the Parliament. They do not even care when the bills are introduced in the Parliament.” This comment reminds us of the lack of political experiences of women members.

Two female members from the BNP and one from the Jatiya Party said that they wanted to retain the 30 reserved seats for women. One respondent remarked, “In our country the law and order situation is deteriorating day by day. The female members of the Union Parisad⁶ (Council) were also raped. So, it is not wise to introduce direct

⁵ In the 7th Parliamentary election the Awami League won 146 seats, the BNP 116, the Jatiya party 31, Jamaat 3 and others won 3 seats. (The *Daily Star*, September 30, 2001). All through the tenure of the 7th parliament, one seat remained non-represented. By-election to the Bhola –1 seat, vacated by Tofail Ahmed soon after the 1996 general election, could not be held due to a court injunction (*The Daily Star*, July 13, 2001).

⁶ Three seats are reserved for women in each Union Parisad (UP) according to the Local Government Union Parisad (2nd Amendment) Act. Women member constituencies cover three wards compared to one ward for her male counterpart. Women UP members have complained of exclusion from responsibilities by the UP chairpersons and members and that they were given no specific duties, power or jurisdiction. (Sayeda Rowshan Qadir, “Sthanio Sarkar Babostai Union Parisade Nirbachito Mohila Shadashshader Bhumica O Karjaboli” in Khaleda Salahuddin and Hamida Akhtar Begum (eds.), *Sthanio Sarkar O Nari Shadashsho Union Parisad*, and Dhaka: Women for Women, 1999, 31. Human Rights in Bangladesh 1998, Dhaka: Ain O Salish Kendro (ASK), The University Press Limited, 1999, 140.] Local Government (Union Parisad) Amendment Bill 2001 was passed in the parliament to increase the participation of women •

election for the reserved seats of women.” One of them commented, “Women can not even go alone to the market. So, how would we want direct election for women?”

Six respondents of the Awami League supported direct election in the reserved seats and said, “There should be sixty four reserved seats in sixty four districts of Bangladesh and the provision of direct election should be introduced.” Barrister Rabia Bhuiyan from the Jatiya Party⁷ placed a bill before the Private Members Bill Committee in 1997, which was pending there. The bill provided that the parliament shall consist of not more than two hundred male members and not less than one hundred female members to be elected in accordance with law from single territorial constituencies by direct election. The proposed bill also inserted that “the election commission shall, out of three hundred constituencies, specify one hundred constituencies for female before every election on a rotation basis ensuring the representation of women from all the districts of the country.”⁸ The proposed bill had some disadvantages. The incumbent male members of the parliament might not want their constituencies to be reserved for women. The Election Commission also might have some difficulties in demarcating constituencies for women.⁹ Two respondents said, “I do not know which system would be helpful for the empowerment of women.”

members at Union Parishad. The bill provides for raising the number of standing committees of the Union Parishad from 7 to 13. The bill will allow each elected woman member to become chairperson of at least one committee. The bill also provides for formation of “*Samaj Unnayan Committee*” in every ward for a reserved seat and a woman member of the Union Parishad will chair the committee (*Bhorer Kagoj*, April 11, 2001). In the City Corporation election in April 2002 women directly contested in reserved seats for the first time. Like the Union Parishad women commissioners covered three wards in the reserved seats (*The Daily Star*, April 25, 2002). But the power and responsibilities of women commissioners from reserved seats were not specified which frustrated them (*Prothom Alo*, June 19, 2003).

⁷ The Jatiya Party, led by former president General Ershad, was a coalition partner in the Awami League government (1996-2001). The Jatiya Party had three reserved seats in the parliament, of which one was held by Rabia Bhuiyan. Bhuiyan submitted the proposal on her own initiative, without the support of her party caucus.

⁸ Rabia Bhuiyan, “The Representation of Women’s Issues in the Parliamentary Committee system,” 3.

⁹ Sohela Nazneen, “Women in Parliament: A Report,” *The Daily Star*, September 15, 2000.

In February 2000, Sheikh Hasina, while she was the Prime Minister cited a Bengali proverb in a television interview “Nai mamar cheye kana mama bhalo” [A blind uncle is better than no uncle]. So we shall continue the system of thirty reserved seats.”¹⁰ After that interview conscientious people thought that if the thirty reserved seats for women were playing a role like that of a blind uncle, why should this system be continued? Sheikh Hasina again remarked, “Women candidates could not survive in the election politics of violence and money. Moreover, the popular belief is that nominating a woman for a seat is the other name of losing it.”¹¹

The treasury bench placed a bill on June 17, 2000 seeking retention of the thirty reserved seats for women in the parliament for 10 years more.¹² The treasury bench did not have the two-third majority in the House required for passage of the bill.¹³ In September 2000, the BNP Standing Committee member Jamiruddin Sirker stated that his party would decide the matter once it returned to power with a two-third majority. But he pointed out that the majority of women in the country had “no headache” for some well-off women enjoying the status of lawmakers. He said, “It’s not a popular issue among the common man nor will it affect our campaign in the next election.”¹⁴ In January 2001, Khaleda Zia (then the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament) said, “The opposition need not attend parliament session to help retain the constitutional provisions for reserved seats.¹⁵ The reserved seats, she argued, could be retained if the government resigned

¹⁰ *Prothom Alo*, February 27, 2000.

¹¹ *The Daily Star*, April 11, 2001.

¹² *The Daily Star*, April 11, 2001.

¹³ *The Daily Star*, April 11, 2001.

¹⁴ *The Daily Star*, September 12, 2000.

¹⁵ The BNP and the Jammal boycotted the parliament proceedings since the 14th session (See, *The Daily Star*, July 14, 2001.)

immediately and the next parliament was elected before April when the constitutional provision for reserved seats was due to expire.”¹⁶

From the above discussion, it is clear that the majority of the members of the 7th parliament were in favour of retaining the thirty reserved seats for women. They did not understand that women would be more accountable to the people and they would be more familiar with the demands of the people through direct election and thus they would become more political. Hajera Sultana, a member of the Bangladesh Workers Party pointed out that the thirty reserved seats for women were ‘bonus points’ for the majority party that fostered ‘yes’ members who were accountable to the party members as they were elected by the members of parliament.¹⁷ The Awami League waited for the BNP’s support until the last moment of the 7th Parliament on the 14th constitutional amendment bill seeking retention of the 30 reserved seats for another 10 years.¹⁸

The women’s organizations of Bangladesh demanded to withdraw the pending bill and introduce another incorporating their demands.¹⁹ They are demanding sixty four to one hundred fifty (number is negotiable) reserved seats for women to be directly elected.²⁰ Though the BNP did not attend in the parliament on the political ground and they were not in favour of direct election for the reserved seats of women, it pledged to increase the number of reserved seats and direct election for women in the election manifesto of the 8th Parliamentary election of 2001.²¹ Although the Awami League was in favour of retaining the previous system, it also pledged that the reserved seats for

¹⁶ *The Daily Star*, January 11, 2001.

¹⁷ Sohela Nazneen, “Women in Parliament: A Report,” *The Daily Star*, September 15, 2000.

¹⁸ *The Daily Star*, July 10, 2001.

¹⁹ *The Daily Star*, January 11, 2001.

²⁰ Fawzia Tawheed, “Politics, Women and the Parliament,” *The Daily Star*, September 15, 2000.

²¹ The Election Manifesto of the BNP 2001.

women would be increased to sixty and direct election would be introduced.²² After winning the election the BNP did not introduce the reserved seats and direct election for women. In an interview Khaleda Zia expressed her doubt about the direct election of women members of parliament. She said, "Women leaders belonging to the BNP who are contesting the city corporation elections have informed me of the difficulties they are facing in campaigns. I personally feel that it is not possible for a woman to cover three wards. It is very tough."²³ Two years later, Khaleda Zia noted that it is not possible for women to contest direct election, because women have to conduct the election campaign in a big election constituency that covers more than one district. How will they get so much money?²⁴ The BNP government planned to increase the seats of the parliament from 300 to 450. Khaleda Zia said that 400 lawmakers would be elected in direct votes while the fifty reserved seats would be distributed proportionately among parties having representation in parliament. A party commanding at least eight lawmakers in parliament will have a woman legislator.²⁵

The Awami League and other opposition parties criticized the government move to expand the number of seats in parliament because the crucial decision was taken without consulting them. The Awami League General Secretary Abdul Jalil said, "We think they [the ruling coalition] have some evil purposes as the decision was taken unilaterally. The ultimate aim is to demarcate constituencies in such a way so that the four-party voters in the coalition's marginal seats increase." Jalil was also critical of the idea of keeping 50 reserved seats for women. He pointed out, "The Awami League as

²² The Election Manifesto of the Awami League, 2001.

²³ *The Daily Star*, April 24, 2002.

²⁴ *Prothom Alo*, January 15, 2004.

²⁵ *The Daily Star*, January 15, 2004.

well as women organizations have been campaigning for direct elections to women's seats."²⁶ The women's organization of Bangladesh rejected the government's plan and demanded direct election in the reserved seats.²⁷

Finally Parliament passed the 14th Amendment Bill of the Constitution amidst abstention by members of the parliament of the main opposition Awami League on May 16, 2004. A total of 226 voted for the bill while one voted against it. The bill says that members of the parliament elected from the 300 general seats will elect women to the 45 reserved seats. The women's seats will be distributed among political parties proportionate to their strengths in parliament. This provision for 45 reserved seats will be valid for the next ten years. This will be effective from the present parliament. The women's organization protested against the provision of indirect election for women and they are pledged to continue the movement for increased reserved seats and direct election for women.²⁸

²⁶ *The Daily Star*, January 15, 2004.

²⁷ *Prothom Alo*, February 25, 2004.

²⁸ *Prothom Alo*, May 17, 2004.

Chapter 6

Problems Faced by Women Politicians

Patriarchy has two faces: public and private. Here the problems faced by women politicians in Bangladesh are analyzed in both the public and the private spheres of patriarchy. In Bangladesh the problems of women politicians in the category of public patriarchy include mastan culture and the availability of illegal arms, accessibility to black money, and fear of sexual harassment. The problems of women politicians in the category of private patriarchy are mainly lack of control over own income, family involvement, and non-cooperation of husbands. Marital status and age are factors that involve both public and private patriarchy.

Public patriarchy

Mastan culture and the availability of illegal arms:

Following Huntington, it can be argued that various governments of Bangladesh were unable to prevent violence due to the absence of effective political institutionalization.¹ Mastan culture and the availability of illegal arms are the most serious bottlenecks to women's participation in politics. Killers, extortionists, looters, perpetrators of violent crimes who operate under the supervision of so-called godfathers are called the Mastans.² Huntington also argues that violence is occurred in the political system where strong

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1968, 21.

² M. Rashiduzzaman, "Bangladesh in 2000 Searching for Better Governance," *Asian Survey*, 41:1, 2001, 123.

parties are absent.³ Political parties in Bangladesh are rearing mastans and promoting a widespread mastan culture.⁴ The birth of Bangladesh stemmed from a bloody Liberation War. During the Liberation War of Bangladesh there were internal and external sources of arms. After independence, the Awami League government had difficulties with the thousands of armed Freedom Fighters. In spite of Mujib's repeated pleas, many Freedom Fighters did not surrender their arms. One scholar argues, "Since the inception of Bangladesh, politics and political actors aspiring for power have had a close relationship with the concept of force. Over the years, the nature of actors have changed and the use of violence holds a strong footage in the country's politics."⁵ After independence some radical leftist parties were involved in destabilizing the regime of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. After the coup of August 1975 different sections of the army used force to consolidate and legitimize the Zia and the Ershad regimes. The student wings of different political parties started to use weapons after the independence of Bangladesh. Student's wings of various political parties have armed cadre. Political parties are not interested to ban student politics, because they want to use their student wings to control the educational institutions. Political party leaders supply arms to student leaders and student leaders supply arms to student activists.⁶ During the autocratic rule of General Ershad, the main political parties of Bangladesh resorted to force, exercised through their students' wings to oust his government. By forming a coalition movement they were able to accomplish their mission with the fall of Ershad regime in 1990. After this autocratic

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 409.

⁴ Md. Aminur Rahman, "Economic Liberalization and the Political Economy of Sustainable Terrorism in Bangladesh," in Shahedul Anam Khan and Shaheen Afroze (eds), *Chandabaji Versus Entrepreneurship: Youth Force in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: Academic Press and Publishers Limited In Association with Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, 1999, 49.

⁵ Neila Husain, *Proliferation of Small Arms and Politics in South Asia: The Case of Bangladesh*, Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 1999, 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-35.

rule, suspicion, hatred and rivalry among the political parties enabled small arms to secure a permanent place in the politics of Bangladesh.⁷ Rounaq Jahan notes,

Neither party is willing to accept electoral defeat and serve as a “loyal opposition” in parliament. As a result, parliament has never functioned properly. Each election has been followed by prolonged boycott of parliament by the political opposition...Both parties have nurtured thugs and criminal elements to intimidate the opposition.⁸

Major political parties of Bangladesh have connections with the underworld arms network.

Arms are smuggled in from throughout South Asia, but most of the arms come from India.⁹ Unofficial estimates put the number of illegal weapons across the country at 250,000, which includes such highly sophisticated firearms as AK-47, AK-56, G-3, and M-16 assault rifles, Uzi machineguns and stenguns.¹⁰ Issuing gun licenses during the Awami League regime (1991-1996) was also a threatening aspect. The Awami League government issued 22,000 gun licenses during their 5-year rule, but in the last 6 months of their tenure a sudden spurt of activism was seen in the matter of issuing gun licenses.¹¹ About 5,000 licenses were issued during this period. Rules were not followed and in many cases without any police investigation licenses were issued on political considerations. Of the 185,000 firearm licenses issued during the last 30 years (till April

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁸ Rounaq Jahan, “Bangladesh in 2002 Imperiled Democracy,” *Asian Survey*, 43:1, 2003, 223.

⁹ Neila Husain, *Proliferation of Small Arms and Politics in South Asia : The Case of Bangladesh*, 25.

¹⁰ *The Daily Star*, August 12, 2001.

¹¹ *Jai Jai Din*, August 7-13, 2001.

30, 2000) in the whole country, about 5,000 were issued during the last 6 months of the Awami League regime.¹²

A study by the “Power and Participation Research Centre” (PPRC) finds that in the 1996 parliamentary election 34% of candidates used mastans.¹³ Another report of a daily newspaper reveals that many candidates of the 1996 parliamentary election hired mastans and illegal arms. A typical group of ten mastans demanded taka 100,000 and they charged taka 200,000 with arms. This rate was much higher in the case of top mastans. The Awami League, the BNP, the Jatiya Party and even the influential leaders of leftist parties hired mastans. An armed cadre of Dhaka University agreed to work twenty-four days with twenty young mastans for the election in a district of Bangladesh. One influential political leader gave them taka 300,000 in advance, and after the election he promised to give them an additional taka 200,000.¹⁴

In the City Corporation election in 2002, nearly 300 of above 1300 candidates with criminal charges contested for the office of more than 200 ward commissioners in the three cities. The police record says that no less than fifty of them were most wanted in various criminal offences including murder, rape, mugging, extortion and land grabbing.¹⁵ At least thirty-two listed or identified criminals were elected ward commissioners of the Dhaka City Corporation.¹⁶ After the City Corporation election on 25th April 2002, four ward Commissioners were killed by October 2002.¹⁷

¹² *Prothom Alo*, August 10, 2001.

¹³ *Bhorer Kagoj*, June 4, 1996.

¹⁴ *Ajker Kagoj*, May 20, 1996.

¹⁵ *The Daily Star*, April 25, 2002.

¹⁶ *The Daily Star*, April 27, 2002.

¹⁷ *Prothom Alo*, October 2, 2002.

An average of eleven people are killed daily in Bangladesh.¹⁸ From 1999 on, there were fifteen incidents of powerful bomb explosion and 104 people were killed, many others were injured, and many of them disabled for life. Every government tried to influence the police investigation to victimize their political oppositions. Therefore, proper investigation is not possible.¹⁹ A police report says that 119 people were suspected as abductors in Chittagong- the port city of Bangladesh, but police could not arrest them due to their political connections with the Awami League, BNP or the Jamaat-i-Islami.²⁰ Violent conflict and murder of opponents between the BNP and the Awami League workers continued. There are also factional fights within the BNP, which are settled through murder and violence. Although the Jamaat-i-Islami is a partner of the present government, the supporters of BNP and Jamaat-i-Islami also clash with each other.²¹

Many respondents to my interview said that they would never win in the direct election within the dominant mastan culture and the availability of illegal arms, because generally women of Bangladesh are not involved in this predominantly male culture. The violent incidences are creating a sense of insecurity among women. A woman parliamentarian said, “I am interested to contest from the general seat in the 8th parliamentary election. But I did not disclose my desire to anyone, because any of my rivals may kill me.” At present most of the Bangladeshi women are not interested to take politics as a profession because of the prevailing mastan culture. And this, in effect, is further strengthening patriarchy.

¹⁸ *Jai Jai Din*, August 28, 2001.

¹⁹ *Prothom Alo*, January 14, 2004.

²⁰ *Prothom Alo*, February 6, 2004.

²¹ Rounaq Jahan, *Bangladesh in 2002 Imperiled Democracy*, 224.

Accessibility to Black money

Illegal and unaccounted money are called black money. Accessibility to black money and the limitless spending in the political process enhances a politician's influence and inhibits women's active participation in politics. At present, elections in Bangladesh are fully dependent on black money. Generally women have no access to black money. The election Commission fixed the election expenditure at a maximum of taka 300,000 for each candidate in the 1996 parliamentary elections,²² but many candidates violated this rule. A report of the 1996 parliamentary election says that many candidates did not abide by the law of election expenditure. In Dhaka, one election candidate erected many ornamented gates, the cost of which was above taka 300,000. The report observes that more than taka 300,000 were easily spent for constructing election offices and other expenditure. In addition, the full amount of the expenditure of posters, leaflets, wall-writings, and transportation was more than taka 300,000. Many candidates of Dhaka city and some other districts spent three or four times more than the specified limit. In some cases, this expenditure was eight or ten times more. This was the picture of visible spending.

The invisible spending of most candidates was much more. Some candidates used cash money to buy the votes of the people of slum areas. Remembering these realities the major political parties nominated those people who had money. Many potential candidates who had no money were excluded from contesting the election of 1996. It was assumed that the average election expenditure of many candidates of the 1996 parliamentary election was taka 1000000. The expenditure of some candidates was above

²² The Election Commission raised electoral expenses from taka 300,000 to taka 500,000 in the 8th parliamentary election (*The Daily Star*, October 1, 2001.)

taka 3000000. The rate of weekly expenditure of a full time influential worker of some constituencies of Dhaka city was taka 10,000. The election spending of minimum 50 candidates crossed two or two and half crore (25 million) taka.²³ Former president Ershad said, “We all are liars. We spend one crore (ten million) taka and submit the expenditure of Taka 500,000. So, how can honest people come to politics? We have to stop the involvement of money and muscle.”²⁴ In the elections of 1954 only 4 percent of the elected parliamentarians were businessmen. In 1973 the figure went up to 24 percent. In 1991 it was 53 percent in addition to 6 percent retired civil and army officials who had gone into business. In 1996 the percentage was about 70.²⁵ In the election of 2001, more than 50 percent nominees of the two major political parties in one way or other were businessmen. More than thirty prominent businessmen won the electoral battle and some of them even defeated influential political leaders.²⁶ The former president of Bangladesh Bodradazza Chowdhury said, “One crore taka is needed to contest the election. One cannot spend one crore taka in the election without the corrupt practices”.²⁷ Candidates can buy votes due to the lack of political knowledge of the voters.

In the patriarchal society of Bangladesh women do not have control over business where the opportunity for corruption exist. A woman parliamentarian told me, “Funding is very important in election contest. We earn our money honestly. Now people earn money dishonestly and with this black money, they buy votes in the election.” Another MP told me, “I am working sincerely and honestly for my constituency. But candidates who have the capacity to spend more money can win the election. In our country

²³ *Weekly Bichitra*, June 14, 1996.

²⁴ *Ajker Kagoj*, January 25, 2004.

²⁵ *Holiday*, September 28, 2001.

²⁶ *The Daily Star*, October 7, 2001.

²⁷ *Ajker Kagoj*, November 16, 2003.

candidates can buy votes due to the lack of political knowledge of the voters. Here sincerity and honesty are not valued and this is the main problem of women.” For the third successive year, the Transparency International (TI) ranked Bangladesh as the most corrupt country among 133 nations of the world.²⁸ Huntington points out that corruption is a criterion of lack of effective political institutionalization.²⁹ It is a face of public patriarchy, which hinders women’s political participation.

Fear of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment includes “staring at, commenting upon, or touching a woman’s body, requests for acquiescence in sexual behavior, repeated nonreciprocated propositions for dates, demands for sexual intercourse and rape.”³⁰ Sexual harassment is considered as violence against women. Following Huntington again it can be argued that despite having laws to protect women from violence, various governments were unable to prevent violence against women due to the absence of effective political institutionalization. In Bangladesh women are sexually harassed on the streets, in the marketplaces, in every institution, even in the police stations.³¹ Always they are insecure without men’s company, though sometimes it is reported that women are sexually harassed, raped or killed in front of even their male family members. An allegation was found that women were sexually harassed by the Executive Director of *Gono Shahajjo Shangsta* (GSS)- a

²⁸ *The Daily Star*, October 8, 2003.

²⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 59.

³⁰ Carole J. Sheffield, “Sexual Terrorism,” in Jo Freeman (ed.), *Women A Feminist Perspective*, U.S.A: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1984, 8.

³¹ Shahnajz Huda, “Perspectives on Sexual Harassment in Bangladesh : Acknowledging its Existence,” *Empowerment*, Vol. 6, 1999, 22.

NGO, which is clamorous about women's rights.³² Girl students are also victims of sexual harassment at university. A survey unfolds that many female university students were the victims of sexual harassment by their male teachers either directly or indirectly.³³ In university, female students are routinely sexually abused, harassed and raped by their male classmates, other students, political goons and even as reported in the print media, by some respected teachers.³⁴ The Jahangirnagar University Fact-Finding Committee reports in 1998 that 20 rapes and over 300 cases of sexual assault took place at that University.³⁵ According to the report of a daily newspaper- *Janakantha*, four elected women members of Union Parishad (Council) were raped within 5 months in 1999.³⁶ A report says that in Bangladesh rape in police custody is an alarming problem. Policemen sexually harass and rape women when they arrest them for committing crime, beat them and speak to them in abusive terms. Sixty-four occurrences of rape by the policemen were reported during 1996-2001. The report further says that policemen also sexually harass their women colleagues.³⁷ The situation of the whole country is more bleak and frustrating. The Annual Report 2001 of Police shows that every day ten women are raped. In the same year 4517 rape cases were reported. Of them 141 were gang raped. Seventy-one women were killed after rape.³⁸ Generally it is observed that most of the victims of rape cases do not report to the police for fear of public disgrace and lack of

³² The allegation brought by a female PABX operator of *Gono Shahajjo Shangsta* (GSS) against the Executive Director, Mahmud Hasan for sexual harassment. See, *Daily Janakantha*, May 19, 1999.

³³ Sultana Rahman Putul and Sharifa Sultana Munnii, "Where professors proposition pupils," *The Independent*, July 9, 1999.

³⁴ *The Daily Star*, October 4, 1998.

³⁵ *Star Weekend Magazine*, 3 : 119, October 2-8. Dhaka. 1998.

³⁶ *Daily Janakantha*, May 19, 1999.

³⁷ *Prothom Alo*, August 24, 2003.

³⁸ *Jugantor* March 8, 2002.

security. Some girls commit suicide to escape the disgraceful situation.³⁹ In a study on garment workers Majumder states, “In the existing social context of Bangladesh, living alone is not safe and secure for the young women. ... The female garment workers living in mess remain always occupied with the fear of attack by the local touts, flesh traders, drug addicts and above all by the landlords and their sons.”⁴⁰

Sexual harassment is a serious factor, which may prevent many women from taking up politics. Politics involves twenty-four hours duty, much travel, strangers and women may face sexual harassment by male leaders or their male political colleagues. Courting arrest and facing police brutalities are more problematic for young women. If a woman political activist is raped or sexually harassed, it damages her political career. Police harassed Moni Begum, a political activist of the BNP on 11 May 1999 during the opposition half-day hartal (general strike)⁴¹ and next day this was published with pictures in different national dailies. Moni Begum described her experience:

A policeman asked another policeman to take off my blouse, so that I could not join in the procession again. Police poked different parts of my body with sticks. After viewing my pictures in the newspapers, I thought that I could never show my face to anyone. Once I thought to commit suicide.⁴²

The police tried to prove that Moni Begum was an immoral woman. They also tried to break up her family telling her husband, “Moni Begum is a bad woman.” They also accused him, “Why do you keep such a woman who participates in the procession?”

³⁹ *Prothom Alo*, March 8, 2002.

⁴⁰ Pratima Paul Majumder, “Violence and Hazards Suffered by Women in Wage Employment: A case of Women Working in the Export-Oriented Garment Industry of Bangladesh,” *Empowerment*, Vol.7, 2000, 15-16

⁴¹ *Prothom Alo*, June 5, 1999.

⁴² *Jai Jai Din*, May 18-24, 1999.

Do you want to maintain family life with this bad woman?”⁴³ A female member expressed a serious concern about girls’ security:

I have two boys. When my boys were little, I faced many problems. My boys always complained that the environment of our home is not conducive to studying. If we had daughters, we had to be more careful. We could not use our house much for political purposes, because men of different classes come to our house for politics and we had to be more careful about our daughters’ security.

These realities reveal that patriarchal society always considers women as sexual objects, not human beings. Rape “is the worst form of intimidation used by men to demonstrate their dominating position. A woman’s right to bodily security is violated in the grossest possible way.”⁴⁴ Rape or any kind of sexual harassment can be used as a way to control women. Politically connected family background helps as a relative safeguard against sexual harassment. We therefore, find that most women parliamentarians came from the politically connected family. Again marriage was helpful for the women politicians. It is found that eighteen out of twenty-three women got the position of Member of Parliament because of their husbands’ political connections.

Private patriarchy

Lack of control over own income

In Bangladesh, a woman’s role as income earner is not recognized; rather she is considered a dependent. However, in recent times, there has been a significant change in

⁴³ *Prothom Alo*, June 5, 1999.

⁴⁴ Roushan Jahan and Mahmuda Islam, *Violence Against Women in Bangladesh Analysis And Action*, Dhaka: Women for Women and South Asian Association for Women’s Studies, 1997,14.

the attitude towards women taking up paid employment. With the breakup of the extended-family system and increasing poverty, large numbers of women from landless and middle-class families are in need of economic support. Women from such families especially in urban areas are searching for any available employment. As a result, they shed off their age-old inhibitions and prejudices. Both urban and rural women are no longer hesitant to join the paid labor force whenever opportunities arise.⁴⁵ Industrialization of the country has integrated women in the development process by providing employment opportunities to them.⁴⁶ A study shows that 35 percent of the female garment workers spend their income absolutely according to their own decision. Forty three percent of the female workers spend their own earning according to joint decision with others. Twenty three percent reported that they have no control over their earning.⁴⁷ After taking credit/loan from the NGOs 24% of women spend their money by themselves, 50% of women spend money along with their husbands. The rest of the women's loan money goes directly to the husbands' ownership.⁴⁸

My study also finds that some women parliamentarians have lack of control over their own earning. Therefore, they cannot spend money for political purposes. In some cases women's empowerment was not possible due to lack of control over their own income. One female parliamentarian said,

⁴⁵ Salma Khan, *The Fifty Percent Women in Development and Policy in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1993, 3.

⁴⁶ Pratima Paul-Majumder and Sharifa Begum, *Upward Occupational Mobility Among Female Workers In The Garment Industry Of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute Of Development Studies, 1997, 13.

⁴⁷ Pratima Paul-Majumder, "Sramajibi Mohilader Daridrer Bibhinna Matra," in Rushidan Islam Rahman, ed., *Daridra O Unnayan : Prekkhapot Bangladesh*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute Of Development Studies, 1997, 138-139.

⁴⁸ Rumel Halder and Rasheda Akhter, "The Role of NGO and Women's Perception of Empowerment: An Anthropological Study in a Village," *Empowerment*, Vol.6, 1999, 61.

I entered politics while I was a student of Dhaka University. After marriage I gave up politics and I did not take any outside paid employment because of the non-cooperation of my husband. Again after many years I went into politics. But I did not get taka 500 or 1000 from my husband for spending in political purposes. Moreover, I did not receive even five taka for my personal purposes. My husband did not care for me much due to the advice of my mother-in-law and sister-in-law. They always told my husband, “Why do you talk so much to your wife?” After I obtained the position of Member of Parliament, my husband asked me to maintain our family financially. In maintaining our family financially I had to go deeply into debt. Three years I had to spend all of my income. Now I do not spend all the money for family maintenance. I saved some amount of money. But I am scared that anytime my husband will take my money. I cannot imagine what I will do after completing 5 years tenure in this parliament. I think it is better to take a job even in a garment factory. I will request Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (the immediate past prime minister) to give me a job somewhere. After being elected as a Member of Parliament my husband did not give me any saris even as an Eid gift. He questioned me, “Now you earn money, why do you need gift?”

Another female member said,

My husband never liked my economic solvency. He was in jail for political reason for some years and this compelled him to give me permission for earning. My in-laws did not like that I took a job and I had a position. But they always wanted my money. After being elected as a Member of Parliament, my husband

does not spend money for family maintenance. I have to spend all my income for family expenditure. So, I have no savings.

This picture reveals that generally women do not earn in Bangladesh, but when they earn they are considered as moneymaking machines, not human beings who have feelings, emotions, and love. Therefore, husbands think that working wives are not supposed to get any gifts, even in *Eid*. Husbands and in-laws families want the money of wives, but they cannot tolerate the higher position of their wives in society. They do not consider that this money comes for the position of wives. If women do earn their husbands do not spend their money for family expenditure. Then husbands want to save their money and buy properties in their own name. Therefore, women have no savings or little savings and they cannot spend money for political purposes. Due to the patriarchal culture, husbands think that wives are their property and therefore, wives' incomes are their husbands' property and husbands have every right to control their wives' income. In this process husbands do not let their wives save money. Women lose their autonomy and cannot take part in politics.

Family involvement

Women's active participation in politics is not visible mostly on the ground of family involvement. In Bangladesh, women do all household activities according to tradition. There is a definite division of labour between male and female. Bossard and Boll note about American society which is also applicable to Bangladeshi society, "It was strong when father was head of the family business, when families were large, and domestic servants available. Under such circumstances there were a number of females available

(older daughters, female relatives, hired help) so that the mother need not ask the man and older boys to help very much with household chores and routine child care.”⁴⁹ At present the circumstances have changed in Bangladesh, the extended family system has been broken and many women are involved in outside paid employment. Domestic servants are not always available. Domestic responsibilities should be shared between husband and wife. It is observed that women perform household activities after discharging their professional responsibilities. Household activities include keeping the home in order, cooking, taking care of husband and children, helping to prepare the home tasks of the children and sending them to school, entertaining guests, looking after in-laws’ family and give them company etc. Though servants help in home management, women do supervise all these complex tasks. Therefore, women cannot take part actively in politics. When the children attain teen age, it is the responsibility of a mother, which is given by the society to look after them. If she is a girl, then mother has to be more alert about her security. A female parliamentarian remarked,

My husband died when he was thirty-three. He was a Member of Parliament of the Awami League in 1973. After his death I was asked to enter. Then my babies were very little. So I was not interested to do politics. When my son and daughter were in school, I became a member of the Lion’s club. My daughter forbade me to go to the Club and I did not. I do not believe in the social work that encourages women to keep their babies in the hands of maidservants and to go out to distribute milk to other babies. If the children do not grow up properly, then all

⁴⁹ James H. S. Bossard and Eleanor Stoker Boll, *The Sociology of Child Development*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966, 216-217.

successes go in vain and I believe that mothers have an important role in bringing up children.

A woman Member of Parliament remarked,

I have two boys. One is in Class Nine and another in Class Six. My mother looks after them. I have no problem. Still the company of the mother is very important. Today I told my younger son that we would go to the market and buy some books. He waited for me, but I could not keep the appointment due to my work.

Another Member of Parliament noted,

I could not spend enough time with my children because of politics. So, my daughter got involved in a romantic relationship with an unsuitable boy and they got married in the court. My husband accused me of not looking after the children.

Another Member of Parliament reported,

I got an offer to apply for the membership of the parliament in 1973. But I did not agree for the sake of my children. I think that women should not get involved in politics neglecting their children.

Obviously, women everywhere play an important role in raising children, but Bangladeshi patriarchal society thinks that it is the only responsibility for women. Therefore, husbands do not share the household activities. Society considers politics to be a man's affair. Duverger's observation is also applicable to Bangladeshi society, "the club, the forum, debates, Parliament and political life in general are still considered to be typically masculine activities."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Maurice Duverger, *The Political Role of Women*, Paris: UNESCO, 1955, 10.

Non-cooperation of husbands

Non-cooperation of husbands keeps women aloof from politics. In Bangladesh men think that women should remain at home and do household activities. One Member of Parliament claimed, “Now men want their wives to work for economic solvency. Still they do not want politician wives.” Politics involves much contact with men and husbands feel jealous when they see their wives deal with men. A woman Member of Parliament revealed,

My husband (a Member of Parliament in the 1973 parliament) does not want me to work for people or politics. He says to me “Why are you getting so involved?” He does not want to understand that my constituency is much bigger than his constituency. Moreover, now the population is much higher than 1973. Naturally the workload is much more higher now.

Another Member of Parliament noted,

My husband is now ill. Because of illness he thinks that politics will make me happy. So, he gave me permission to go into politics. I could not spend much time in politics if he were not sick. Now I speak to him with submission so that he does not prevent me from participating in politics.

One Member of Parliament remarked,

Women’s participation in politics fully depends on the husbands’ attitude. Many husbands now allow their wives to get involved in politics, because husbands can be successful in business through the political connections of their wives. Besides, the position of the wives enhances the status of the family. After getting that status husbands do not let their wives work for politics.

Women are used in the by elections for retaining their husbands' seats. After retaining those seats through by-elections husbands get angry when their wives get involved in political work. Sometimes this happens for sexual jealousy; sometimes husbands think that they are deprived from their wives' company and attention. Sometimes they think that their wives' work towards people is making their wives powerful and husbands cannot tolerate wives' power. It is also observed that husbands do not want their wives to belong to a different political party. If a woman gets married to a member of another political party, then she has to give up politics.

Patriarchy: public and private

Marital Status and Age

Women's marital status and age are important factors in engaging in active politics. It is found that all the women parliamentarians were married except one. Their minimum age was about thirty-five. The comment of that one unmarried women parliamentarian was:

In our society marriage upgrades the status of women, but I was not married due to my political involvement. Generally men do not get married to female politicians. I got many marriage proposals. Some men were not interested to marry me, again some asked me to give up politics. In the 60s many female students were involved in politics. The students of the *Chatra* Union (Student wing of the Communist Party) were liberal and many of them got married to female students of that party. On the other hand, the members of the *Chatra* League (student wing of the Awami League) were conservative and those who obtained the leadership position expected to marry the daughters of ministers or

the beautiful daughters of rich persons. So, I could not get married. Many women are not interested in politics due to the problems of marriage.

From the comment of this woman parliamentarian, it is apparent that she was dedicated to politics and she thought that a politician from the same party background would be a suitable bridegroom for her, but the politicians of the Awami League were not interested to marry her. She did not get a suitable proposal from any one who would agree to allow her to continue her political activities. As Kotalova notes, “In Bangladesh it is felt that ‘a woman must be given in marriage at least once’ and more, she should be married ‘in time’.”⁵¹ A study reveals that “not only the parents of an unmarried mature girl, but the girl herself, feels guilty if she remains unmarried for some time. Parents might begin to think of her as a burden, and it is said that such a girl is viewed as “the spine of a fish stuck in the throat.”⁵² Arranging a suitable marriage is more important than becoming established in a career, because Bangladeshi society does not honour unmarried women, even with high position. Society regards married and non-professional women higher than unmarried and highly professional women. Even top ranking officials’ non-professional wives are more honoured than unmarried high professional women. When I asked one of my former students, “what do you do now?” She replied proudly, “I do nothing. But I got married and my husband is a magistrate.” One female parliamentarian said, “Men think that unmarried women who come to politics mix freely with men and they are seen as available for sex. Men hope that they can enjoy and use these women

⁵¹ Jitka Kotalova, *Belonging to Others Cultural Construction of Womenhood in a Village in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1996, 190.

⁵² K.M. Ashraful Aziz and Clarence Maloney, *Life Stages, Gender And Fertility In Bangladesh*, Dhaka: International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, 1985, 55-56.

sexually.” It is observed that marriage of women active politicians is difficult; again there is a great possibility of sexual harassment in the case of unmarried women politicians.

Many women parliamentarian claimed that the age of women is also an important factor in participating in active politics. When a woman becomes older and her children are grown up, she can actively take part in politics. The husband of a women parliamentarian (elected through the by-election from her husband’s seat) said, “Women should be involved in politics when they are 40 years old and they have grown up sons and daughters. If they get involved in active politics earlier, then the children will be uncared for and their house will be dirty.” Another female members revealed that there was a great possibility of sexual harassment in the case of young women politicians, because men’s attraction to young and beautiful girls was natural.”

Again marriage is helpful for the women politicians. It is found that eighteen out of twenty-three women got the position of Member of Parliament because of their husbands’ political connections. Sometimes widows of politically connected persons or politicians get involved in politics. A widow woman parliamentarian said that if her husband were alive, she would not get involved in politics for the sake of her family. These widows did not face problems created by husbands in Bangladeshi patriarchal society. Another widowed Member of Parliament noted, “Now I have no problem in participating in politics. Husbands of many female members are authoritarian. They always advise their wives on political matters. They want people to come and speak to them, not to their wives.” Another member felt that many husbands imposed restrictions on the mobility of their wives. Therefore, it is clear that marital status and age are important factors in women’s active participation in politics.

From the above-discussion, it is evident that public patriarchy is being strengthened because of criminalization of politics, use of black money, widespread sexual harassment. Government cannot prevent violence, corruption, and sexual harassment due to the low level of institutionalization. Besides, husbands' authoritarian attitude towards wives that considers them as property or earning machines rather than human beings also hinders women's participation in politics in Bangladesh.

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Struggle against Patriarchy and Low Level of Political Institutionalization

Women's participation in politics is extremely limited in Bangladesh despite the unique experience of having a woman prime minister and a woman opposition leader. This raises two related questions: how did Bangladesh get these two women leaders, and despite having these two leaders why is women's political participation extremely low?

My study leads me to the conclusion that these two women leaders emerged in Bangladesh politics due to the low level of political institutionalization and patriarchy. Paradoxically, these are also the main reasons, which keep women in general down. These two women leaders did not come from grass-roots level politics, a situation that Huntington pointed out as one of the prerequisites of political institutionalization. Using Huntington's notion of political institutionalization, Bertocci also finds that Bangladesh is experiencing low level of political institutionalization.¹ After the death of Sheikh Mujib and Ziaur Rahman, both the Awami League and BNP were faction-ridden. The members of the two parties were unable to elect a consensus leader from their parties. As a result, both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia emerged in politics due to their kinship and marriage to prevent disintegration of their parties.

Using Huntington's criterion of adaptability I find that after independence the Awami League started to administer the country, but it had difficulties adapting itself to governing. The Awami League spent most of its time fighting against Pakistani internal colonialism. It was not ready to govern a newly independent country. Factionalism

¹ Peter J. Bertocci, "Bangladesh in the Early 1980s: Praetorian Politics in an Intermediate Regime", *Asian Survey*, 22:10, 1982, 992.

existed within the Awami League. The Awami League did not articulate and aggregate the interests of various social groups and lacked autonomy, which is an essential criterion of institutionalization. The government became corrupt and it was unable to prevent the violence prevailing in the country. Huntington argues that violence occurs due to the absence of highly institutionalized political system.

There were many sub-units in the Awami League, but these were not effective which made the Awami League the simplest political organization, which symbolized the low level of institutionalization. Sheikh Mujib and his close associates made all decisions. The decisions did not come from the grassroots level. After Sheikh Mujib's constitutional amendment that turned Bangladesh into a one-party system with a presidential form of government, the people of Bangladesh felt alienated. The Bangladesh army whose members were dissatisfied with Sheikh Mujib took this alienation as an opportunity to organize a bloody military coup on August 15, 1975. Sheikh Mujib and all his family members except his two daughters were brutally killed.

General Ziaur Rahman came to power in 1975 through coup and countercoup. He created a new political party, the BNP and legitimized his rule through elections, but his party was also faction-ridden. There were different sub-units in the BNP, but like the Awami League, these were also not effective. Zia and his close associates made all the decisions. Huntington points out weak parties depend on their leaders, which is a criterion of low level of political institutionalization. Due to lack of adaptability, complexity, autonomy and coherence the BNP was not highly institutionalized.

During the Zia regime the Awami League support base weakened and it faced serious factionalism. Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Raman who was

basically a housewife, emerged as a leader of the Awami League when it was about to disintegrate. In 1981 Zia was killed in an abortive coup. Khaleda Zia, widow of Zia and another housewife, became the leader of the BNP as a symbol of unity. In the absence of suitable male heirs these two women leaders emerged in Bangladesh due to the low level of political institutionalization and patriarchy. All three sons of Sheikh Mujib were killed; therefore no male members were left to take the leadership of the Awami League. On the other hand, Ziaur Rahman's sons were too young while he was killed which compelled Khaleda Zia to take the leadership of the BNP.

Black money and *mastan* culture are essential factors in Bangladeshi politics. Following Huntington it can be argued that due to low level of political institutionalization different Bangladeshi governments were unsuccessful in preventing violence and corruption. Moreover, the low level of political institutionalization helps to strengthen patriarchy. Bangladeshi women are not involved with the *mastan* culture where illegal arms are sources of power. Men's accessibility to black money or illegal money and the limitless spending in the political process enhance their influence and inhibit women's active participation in politics. In Bangladeshi society women do not have control over business where the opportunities of corruption exist. This study reveals that generally women do not earn in Bangladesh, but if they do earn, their husbands do not spend money for family expenditure. Therefore, women have no savings or little savings and they cannot spend money for political purposes. Most husbands in Bangladesh think that wives are their property and therefore, wives' incomes are their husbands' property and husbands have every right to control their wives' income. In this process husbands do not let their wives save money. Women lose their autonomy and

cannot take part in politics. Society considers politics to be men's affairs and household activities to be women's arena. Therefore, husbands do not share the household activities. Non-cooperation of husbands keeps women aloof from politics.

Despite this, many women are used in the by-elections for retaining their husbands' seats. Many husbands now allow their wives to get involved in politics, because husbands can use the political status of their wives in getting business. Besides, the position of the wives enhances the status of their family. Husbands want to take advantage of the political connections of their wives, but they do not consider that their wives are supposed to work for the people and for the political parties. Husbands do not let their wives work for politics. My interviews have revealed that husbands of many Members of the 7th parliament were authoritarian. They often advised their wives on political matters. They wanted people to come and speak to them, not to their wives. Many husbands imposed restrictions on the mobility of their wives.

Some men only want to use women as instruments to fulfill their sexual needs. One female parliamentarian commented that unmarried women who come to politics were seen as available for sex. Some men hope that they can enjoy and use these women sexually. There is a great possibility of sexual harassment in the case of unmarried women politicians. Sexual harassment is considered as violence against women. Following Huntington again it can be argued that despite having laws to protect women from violence, various governments were unable to prevent violence against women due to the absence of effective political institutionalization. Rape or any kind of sexual harassment can be used to control women. A politically connected family background helps to safeguard women against sexual harassment. Most women members of the 7th

parliament came from politically connected families. They had no political experience and became members of the parliament due to their family connections. Most women who had experience were also nominated due to their family connections. Women parliamentarians were the exclusively elite class in Bangladesh in terms of their family's educational and occupational background.

In the process of indirect election, the thirty reserved seats for women were 'bonus points' for the majority party that produced 'yes' members who were accountable to the party members as they were elected by the members of the parliament. In Bangladesh these thirty reserved seats helped the BNP and the Awami League to win the majority seats in the parliament. For the provision of reserved seats opposition political parties did not have any chance to break the unity of the coalition government and pick up the support of small parties due to low level of political institutionalization. Therefore, political parties want to retain the previous system of the reserved seats. The majority of the women members of the 7th parliament were in favour of retaining the thirty reserved seats for women. They did not believe that women would be more accountable to the people and they would be more familiar with the demands of the people through direct election. If direct election in the reserved seats is introduced, will the women representatives serve the interests of women? If they serve the interests of women, are these the interests of elite class women? Directly elected women parliamentarians have higher status, but they do not speak much about women's issues. Women leaders want to establish themselves as leaders of the country and they do not want to speak about women, which is a marginal issue. Once I asked for an interview with Sheikh Hasina, but she refused to give the interview and commented, "Being a

leader, why should I think of women separately.”² The women’s organizations of Bangladesh argue that if direct election in the reserved seats for women is introduced, then the women members would be the representatives of women, not the representatives of the political parties.³ Apparently, the women’s organizations of Bangladesh fail to understand that these upper class women are unlikely to represent the middle or lower class women because of the conflict of interests. They cannot be expected to go beyond their class interests.

How can women’s participation in politics be increased? Here are some suggestions. Women’s organizations should fight not only for direct election in the reserved seats for women, but also to create an environment where women of all classes can be elected to the parliament and can speak about the interests of all women. To achieve this goal government should stop criminalization of politics in Bangladesh. The leaders must be politically committed to eradicate the use of illegal money and muscle power. Political parties should stop patronizing the mastans. Corruption is mainly responsible for the wider rich-poor income gap. Government should take initiative to reduce the rich-poor gap. The corrupt practices of the police forces must be checked. Government should provide proper training and sophisticated arms to the police force. The salary of police forces should be increased. There are many laws, which can protect women from oppression, but these should be implemented so that women cannot be abused. Democratic culture should be introduced in the decision making process of the political parties.

² Farah Deeba Chowdhury, “Politics and Women’s Development: Opinion of Women MPs of the Fifth Parliament in Bangladesh,” *Empowerment*, Vol.1, 1994, 23.

³ *Prothom Alo*, February 25, 2004.

At the same time the patriarchal attitude towards women should be changed. Consciousness should be created among the people of Bangladesh that women are not sexual objects or anybody's property. From primary to higher levels of education, women's studies should be included in the syllabus. At the family level from childhood, boys and girls should be treated equally and girls should be equally encouraged to learn about the social and political issues of Bangladesh. These will enhance women's interest in political participation. Mass media can play a great role in the raising of consciousness about the equality between men and women. Day care centres should be established so that women can work outside and their babies can stay safe. Lack of day care centres prevents many women from working outside. Household activities should be shared between husband and wife. Obviously, women everywhere play an important role in raising children, but Bangladeshi patriarchal society thinks that it is the only responsibility for women. This attitude should be changed.

In Bangladesh, sons are preferred because it is believed that only sons should look after their parents. When the Quran instructs about the responsibility towards parents, it does not instruct only for men. Daughters also have the same right to look after their natal families; if we carry through on the Quran, daughters will not be considered burdens in poverty-stricken families. This value should be introduced by using the words of Quran.

Islam plays an important role in society and politics of Bangladesh. Bangladeshi people want to see the use of Islamic symbols in public life. I believe that women's movement is a political movement and women's organizations of Bangladesh should employ an Islamic interpretation, which ensures gender equity. If women's organizations do not use Islamic symbols and Islamic interpretation, they cannot involve mass women

in their movement, and, without mass support, government will not pay attention to the demands of women. Regarding the direct election in the reserve seats for women, the BNP Standing Committee member Jamiruddin Sirker's observation is correct. He stated that the majority of women in the country had "no headache" for some well-off women enjoying the status of lawmakers. He said, "It's not a popular issue among the common man nor will it affect our campaign in the next election."⁴ Using Islamic symbols and rhetoric is an effective way for the issue of women's election to acquire mass appeal among the broad population of women.

Finally, women of Bangladesh must fight against patriarchy so that women are considered as human beings. At the same time women must also fight for political institutionalization, which will prevent violence and corrupt practices. Then rational debate about the vital issues of the people, not money or muscle power will be the dominant factor of electoral politics in Bangladesh. If reason becomes a dominant factor, then women can participate equally in the decision-making process of Bangladesh.

⁴ *The Daily Star*, September 12, 2000.

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Appendix 1
Interview Questionnaire

- 1) Name
- 2) Profession
- 3) Educational Qualification
- 4) Father's Profession
- 5) Father's Education
- 6) Mother's Profession
- 7) Mother's Education
- 8) Husband's Profession
- 9) Husband's Education
- 10) Political Experience
- 21) What problems do you face in participating in active politicians? I started open discussion with this question.



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Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Human Subjects

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal or other type of study submitted by:

Principal Investigator: Farah Deeba Chowdhury

Name of Research Project: Problems of Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh – An Empirical Study

REB File Number: 03-080

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Conduct of Research Involving Humans.

Please note that approval is only effective for one year from the date approved. If your research project takes longer than one year to complete, submit Form #3 (Annual Report) to the REB at the end of the year and request an extension. You are also required to submit Form #5 (Completion of Research) upon completion of your research.

Date:

28th Oct '03

Signature of REB Chair:

Dr. John Young