
Bangladesh: Women Leaders, Democratization, and Security



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Starting from 1991, Bangladesh remained under elected civilian governments for 16 years until 11 January 2007, when a military intervention occurred. Many observers believed that democracy, however flawed, had become consolidated in the country. It came as a surprise when Bangladesh slipped into military rule. The military regime ended two years later when an election was held. This article focuses on this military regime and the gender implications of this intervention; by doing this it brings forth security concerns of poor developing countries affected by gender and some social science discourses. It aims at expanding the literature on women leaders and contributing towards a better understanding of Bangladesh politics, democratization and security issues in developing countries.

Gender is written all over Bangladesh. The country has been governed since the onset of democratization in early 1990s by two political parties led by two women leaders. When Bangladesh, a developing country, is discussed in development discourses it is shown as a success story in achieving gender related development goals — reduction of maternal mortality rate, for instance — and its leadership cites gender related achievements in their presentations in international fora. Bangladesh has a cabinet in which very important ministries, such as the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Agriculture, are led by women. It would, therefore, be interesting to take a look at the gender dimensions of the military rule that resulted from power being wrested from the grips of women leaders.

Background

Bangladesh has two major parties capable of governing the country. The Awami League (AL) headed by Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Sheikh Mujib) who led the independence movement. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is headed by Khaleda Zia, wife of Ziaur Rahman (Zia), a former president. Both Sheikh Mujib and Zia were assassinated. Both of these women have been, since the early eighties, leading two major political parties. Khaleda Zia has served two terms as prime minister and Sheikh Hasina is

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serving her second term in 2012.⁽¹⁾ Both of these parties led a democratization movement throughout the 1980s to oust General Ershad. The two leaders are well-known inside Bangladesh as leaders of the democratization process and for being tenacious. It is from their leadership that Bangladesh stumbled into military rule in 2007. Under the leadership of these parties and these two leaders, Bangladesh's economy was further liberalized to see a growth rate of above 5 per cent for more than a decade. Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country. This means these two women leaders have been leading a Muslim-majority country for more than two decades. Just this fact makes them important for research in women's studies and political science. Very little has been written about them as leaders.

But they have been written about in the articles and books published on Bangladesh politics. Most of them have passed negative judgments. Even their titles are a little scary. For instance, *Bangladesh in 2003: Vibrant Democracy or Destructive Politics?* Even articles that do not have titles with strong negative connotation find Bangladesh politics to be disturbing.⁽²⁾ However, research done on specific socio-economic issues usually sees considerable progress achieved under the leadership of the two political parties. For instance, child mortality rate has been halved from 50 per 1000 to 24; there has been progress in agricultural input management and aquaculture.⁽³⁾

Authors writing on specific socio-economic issues tend to see impressive achievements under the leadership of these two leaders and their parties whereas those who write about Bangladesh politics tend to be negative. Sometimes contradictory descriptions can be seen in a single article as the one written by Fowler in which Bangladesh is described as a country characterized by natural disasters, dysfunctional politics, corruption, Islamic terrorism, and poor governance.⁽⁴⁾ The same article also presents the puzzle of a sustained 6 per cent growth rate. The two women leaders become prominent when politics is being considered; their gender can attract blame. This, however, is not to say that other factors are not also at work.

Although there were problems, social, political and economic, the country was making progress, and in some sectors — tremendous progress. The military wrested over control amid chaos and confusion on 11 January 2007. A developing country where democracy almost consolidated and impressive economic growth occurred under female leadership fell into military rule. The question arises: What are the gender implications of such an unusual military takeover?

Methodology

This is a qualitative study. The author has used: Bangladeshi newspapers and magazines; recorded televised speeches and interviews of leaders, political elites, specialists, and famous journalists; US Congressional hearings and reports. Interviews of Bangladeshi and American scholars, American government officials, non-government organization officials, and retired US diplomats have been used. The author also interviewed an intellectual

who is widely considered to be a coup insider with close links to the military; he is referred to as the pro-coup intellectual in the text. These interviews have been semi-structured in-depth interviews which the author personally conducted.

Much of the material for this article draws upon the research the author has been doing for a book project titled, 'The United States and Democracy in Bangladesh'; I conducted some interviews in the United States during my tenure as a Fulbright scholar. I recorded statements, interviews, special programmes from television during the military regime and a few days after the election in December 2008. Television materials are thus audio materials. Online versions of *The Economist* and the *Time Magazine* have been used; hence no page numbers are given. Sheikh Hasina has written about her experience after the coup in one of her books. Khaleda Zia is not in the habit of writing. The author does not have personal access to the two leaders but had a brief meeting with Khaleda Zia in 2011.

Key assumptions and arguments

- a. The literature about women leaders has created a negative discourse which is related to interventionist tendencies in the military and its external and internal supporters. The coup was against the discursively constructed leaders and Bangladesh politics.
- b. The US war on terror and the resulting policy to expand security linkages with Third World countries influenced the coup.
- c. The burgeoning US-India partnership was related to the coup, especially against the backdrop of a rising China.
- d. Gender and gendered assumptions were important in legitimizing the coup as well as maintaining the military in power. This argument and the first three are not mutually exclusive. The gender dichotomy lying at the foundation of Western strategic thinking can influence the exclusionary perceptions of China's rise.

Third world leaders and women leaders

At the beginning feminist scholarship tended to analyze women as women. African American scholars critiqued this and offered intersectionality as a concept to understand the impact of different factors including gender. Those who emphasize intersectionality argue that there is no need to think that sex is the only and the most important factor. The intermingling of race, class, and gender can produce a different reaction which race or gender alone cannot. Leadership and gender studies now take the intersection of different factors more seriously.⁽⁵⁾

For this paper, the two women leaders were not just women leaders but also Third World women leaders. Both of them are mothers. It will be argued later that the military used images and rhetoric that it expected its gendered

audience to read in a particular way. Also, because they are women and women leaders of a developing South Asian country, their popularity and staying power were misinterpreted by the external forces involved as well as the very masculine military leadership usually receiving training in Western training centres.

Derrida's concept of dichotomy is often used by feminist scholars to show how the second term in our gendered society signifies the feminine; for instance mind/body, order/chaos, good/evil, etc.⁽⁶⁾ The dichotomy of order and feminine chaos was very much in play to justify the coup and later the regime constructed a media campaign around the dichotomy of leader/woman. This was an effort to show that the two women remained only women and never became leaders. In addition, solitary confinement was used as gendered punishment.

A negative discourse

It is true that the literature on women leaders is inadequate but it contains systematic negative evaluation of Third World women leaders. This is inadvertently so because, even now, the majority of national level women leaders are Third World leaders. Before the election of Angela Merkel as Chancellor in Germany, the overwhelming majority of women leaders came from the Third World. This is not to argue that the negative discourse has led to the coup. Discourses have complex relations to existing power structures and those are not uni-dimensional. But discourses can be linked to power structures or to other political phenomena in intriguing ways as has been shown by Foucault himself and others after him.⁽⁷⁾

In his study of Indira Gandhi's legacy, Morris-Jones gives a typical negative assessment. Comparing Indira Gandhi to her father Jawaharlal Nehru, he shows how his father and his cohorts built the democratic polity and how Indira Gandhi seriously weakened the important democratic institutions. She made the parliament docile, split the Congress Party in 1969, and curtailed state autonomy. Evaluation of performance aside, authors have shown her to have been insecure, lonely, and sick as a child. Her lonely, insecure childhood is relentlessly related to her adulthood by Shagal. This is not to say that objective assessment of Indira Gandhi does not exist; but those tend not to be leadership studies.⁽⁸⁾

Benazir Bhutto did not fare any better. She is said to have two selves, the Radcliffe* and the Larkana (in Sindh, her home province) selves. Her Radcliffe self is modern and rational whereas her Larkana self is emotional, *irrational* and *contrived*.⁽⁹⁾ It is the Larkana self that dominated Benazir. Her personality is thus put under a question mark. Her womanhood is also emphasized when one author lets the media jokes flow into a research article on Benazir Bhutto and the reader is informed that all Benazir was able to deliver as a prime minister was a baby.⁽¹⁰⁾ For Ziring, her gender impeded political

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compromise because “Nawaz Sharif refused to yield to a woman, and he set a course for his organization that was destined to win it all.”⁽¹¹⁾

In her autobiography, Benazir Bhutto gave details of her government’s efforts and achievements. She wrote about her difficulties dealing with the army and that the American officials were more comfortable working with the army rather than her civilian government. Lately, in a Congressional hearing the American lawmakers have said that they were wrong not to support the civilian democrats and to support the military and as a result US policy in Pakistan was in shambles. Benazir Bhutto has claimed the same in her autobiography and other writings while arguing for Western support for democracy in Pakistan.⁽¹²⁾

The Bangladeshi leaders have faced some extremely negative criticism in the literature. Chowdhury’s assessment of their governance performance is very harsh, “Corruption has been a perennial problem in Bangladesh. Rather than resolving that problem, fifteen years of *women’s leadership* have increased the scale and dimension of corruption to gigantic proportions.” Chowdhury thinks they quarrel irrationally and publicly vilify each other.⁽¹³⁾ We will see that the tone of this article, in addition to other characteristics, is reflected in the very negative narrative constructed by the military and its supporters during the emergency.

The literature also manifests a stylistic feature which is generally absent from the literature on male leaders: it shows women leaders to be acting as persons rather than playing the role of a leader or representing a coalition of factions or being constrained by politico-economic-cultural structures of the society they are functioning in. This results in readers coming away with the feeling that these Third World women leaders, like Indira Gandhi, are persons with tremendous powers and can wilfully destroy all the important political institutions. Or, they are like Benazir Bhutto whose divided and problematic personality keeps her from allying with saner political forces.

When negative evaluations and personalization merge with the literature’s tendency to show that women leaders are controlled by male elites or trained by husbands or fathers they appear to be accidents or spectacles, rather than natural results of particular forces or structures of Third World politics. This can lead to misjudgments by specific interventionist actors which the paper will later argue happened in the Bangladesh case. Reid mentions that the charismatic queens of Southeast Asia were under male elite control. Thompson believes that once in power even their husbands don’t take women leaders seriously. It should also be mentioned that an expert of Bangladesh politics has told the author that the two leaders are very powerful in their parties and they control the party with an iron fist.⁽¹⁴⁾

Media discourses can mingle with academic discourses as happened in Bangladesh and is still happening as the media keeps telling that the two Bangladeshi female leaders are confrontational, irrational, selfish and even unpatriotic. The discourse flowing about Third World women leaders does give the impression that such leaders are controlled, inefficient, or destructive. The

coup was against the discursive construction of the two leaders as much as it was against the so-called chaotic politics.

Regime change in Bangladesh

Bangladesh had gone through the consolidation test of power passing twice, through election, from one party to another. Prominent Bangladeshi scholars thought coups were going to be very unlikely, if not impossible, after the movement for democracy in 1990.⁽¹⁵⁾ Hakim thought that the elected government's legitimacy, emergence of the bureaucracy as a power broker, donor's dislike for such interventions and the West's new emphasis on democratization were going to bring an end to military intervention in Bangladesh. An added reason is the Bangladeshis' preference for civilian governments.⁽¹⁶⁾ Nonetheless, the coup came on 11 January 2007, when power passed from a civilian caretaker government (CTG), a government setup to conduct elections, through a declaration of emergency to another civilian CTG openly backed by the military. It was a carefully crafted military coup with a civilian face.

Bangladesh seemed to be descending into this coup after Khaleda Zia, the Prime Minister, handed over power on 27 October 2006. A crisis was brewing around the issue of a free and fair election. The Awami League (AL) wanted a free and fair election but felt the Election Commission was not impartial and the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), Justice Aziz, could not be trusted. The CTG was headed by president Iazuddin, a BNP selected president, and the AL felt it was not acceptable that the neutral CTG should be headed by the president of the previous government. The CTG wanted to hold the parliamentary election on 22 January 2007. The AL was going to participate in the election but suddenly pulled out citing foul play. The future election became controversial. It was around this controversial election that the coup processes proceeded. The military later said that it wanted to save the country from a civil war. But such chaos in Bangladesh politics was not new. Both the parties are capable of handling such situations and they did this before, in 1996, when Khaleda Zia's government resigned, in the face of mounting agitation, after remaining in power for only three weeks.

A coup coalition developed among the military, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) network, important sectors of the media, and the US democracy promotion establishment. Before going any farther, a few words about the NGOs and US democracy promotion establishment are in order. Bangladesh is thought to be an NGO haven with its micro credit experiment drawing much international attention. There are thousands of NGOs in Bangladesh with the government having hardly any administrative capability to monitor their activities. Almost all these NGOs receive foreign funding and have very close relations with donor countries and agencies. They act as tools to implement neo-liberal economic policies by usurping state activities. NGOs exist as a strong network and can be used by external actors when necessary. A Bangladeshi commentator has shown that an interlinked NGO elite worked to

prepare the way for the coup.⁽¹⁷⁾ Some parliament members, during a parliament session, accused the NGOs of bringing on military rule during 2007-2008.⁽¹⁸⁾

The US democracy promotion establishment is large and its democracy promotion activities are conducted all over the globe. The institutions involved in democracy promotion are: National Endowment for Democracy (NED), its two agencies, National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the National Republican Institute (IRI), USAID, Asia Foundation, etc. Experts doing research on US democracy promotion think it is difficult, if not impossible, to really clarify all the activities and resources that go into democracy promotion.⁽¹⁹⁾ This establishment carries out training work, observes how a political establishment is performing, maintains links with NGOs, political parties, and other organizations including individual politicians. An IRI official described to the author how the IRI trained local government representatives, held seminars to educate politicians and hear their views, conducted opinion surveys to know about the thinking of the people and kept close connection with the government.⁽²⁰⁾ This NDI official interviewed portrayed his agency as an organization that acts as a guardian of democracy and links up democratic leaders of the world and helps countries solve problems — an essentially moral role.⁽²¹⁾

Such activities give these agencies almost total penetration of a political system in the name of democracy aid. The establishment itself thinks it is promoting the foreign policy interests of the United States. The first George W. Bush administration made democracy promotion part of its security strategy.⁽²²⁾ Some have stressed that the United States underscores democracy promotion whenever it wants to intervene in a country militarily.⁽²³⁾ When the US was preparing to attack Iraq it said it wanted Iraq to be democratic and it also talked about supporting democracy throughout the Middle East.⁽²⁴⁾ This was because the administration at the time felt democratic governments were more stable. Carothers has shown it was in the name of democratising El Salvador that the US embassy completely controlled the election process there in the early 1980s. The NED, Robinson demonstrates, was heavily involved with Violeta Chamorro's opposition campaign against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.⁽²⁵⁾

Related to the democracy promotion activities is how the discourse of democratization is maintained and reinforced and rejuvenated through providing grant money and scholarships to Third World intellectuals to do research and write on democratization. The coup insider whom the author interviewed is one such intellectual who has done research and writing for US agencies and won grants and scholarships. He also got US funding to do educational seminars about the deficiencies in the political system of Bangladesh a few months before the intervention. Such seminars aimed at creating consciousness and discontent against the way politics was functioning in Bangladesh. These multipronged initiatives generate tremendous capability to influence an election. Many Bangladeshi observers thought that Bangladesh was subjected to an experiment of regime change to advance US foreign policy without a war as in

Afghanistan.⁽²⁶⁾ Needless to say, such regime changes affect a country's foreign policy and security alignments.

In Bangladesh, politics is structured around two hostile political parties, the AL and the BNP. Both these parties have gone through enough bloodshed. Because of the involvement of external forces and the military, the major parties have not been able to develop a functioning relationship as fellow political parties in the same country. The coup coalition created instability around the issue of a fair election. The media vilified CEC Aziz, the NDI informed the press that there were 10.30 million false voters in the voter list, and the UNDP resident chief delivered a letter to the Army Chief Moin U. Ahmed from the UN stating that if the Army helped with the election it would be deprived of peace mission assignments.⁽²⁷⁾ An NDI official said that he thought Aziz was not trustworthy as a person and as the CEC. He seemed personally concerned about CEC Aziz and how he was bent on rigging the election.⁽²⁸⁾ Such personal involvement in another country's politics is allowed and promoted through US democracy promotion.

Civil society organizations or NGOs were holding citizen education programmes and campaigns for honest candidates all over the country starting from at least the early 2006.⁽²⁹⁾ Wikileaks cables show the US embassy took the position that the BNP was bent on rigging the election. All these went to discredit politicians and political processes in Bangladesh and the election process seemed to be heading towards a single-party election on 22 January 2007 and the army intervened on 11 January 2007. The day after the intervention, the British high commissioner, Anwar Chowdhury, told the media that they (the West) could not allow such an election.

Sometime after the coup many BNP leaders accused external forces of telling both the AL and the BNP to be adamant in their stands against and for the election. The US war against terror in the post-cold war period created the urge to expand military penetration through cooperation frameworks with developing countries and regime change through the help of the democracy establishment linked with worldwide NGO networks. Such regime changes took place as colour revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, Serbia, and Kyrgyzstan. These revolutions were interlinked and Russia took steps to resist them.⁽³⁰⁾

In addition to the US, European countries also have democracy promotion activities.⁽³¹⁾ The Western democracy promotion establishment is enormous and they are linked with one another. Some, like Robinson, think the democracy promotion activities are a non-military way of retaining complete control over Third World politics with the aim to promote economic liberalization.⁽³²⁾ Such a global democracy establishment can work concertedly, if necessary, as they did in Bangladesh. Many in Bangladesh accused the European Union of interference in Bangladesh politics and working for the coup and supporting the military regime. In Bangladesh the pro-Western elites with links to the NGOs, sections of the military, the global democracy promotion network of the West, and part of the US military strategic community were mobilized to change the regime in the country and install a technocratic

apolitical government to further integrate Bangladesh with the global economy and build it as an anti-terror close ally of the US against China. The effort at regime change failed and a political party came to power after election on 29 December 2008. But the American effort to have Bangladesh as a strategic partner continued. Now it is pushed as part of the new Pacific Strategy as outlined by Hillary Clinton in her piece in *Foreign Affairs*, November 2011.

Khaleda Zia was, it seems, aware of the plans to install a military or technocratic government in the name of political reforms and for war against corruption and she objected to such unconstitutional change.⁽³³⁾ NGOs, local and global, played a prominent role in this effort at regime change.⁽³⁴⁾ There was strong NGO representation on the government after 11 January. The famous NGO figure, Dr. Yunus, was tapped to head a government that would be an alternative to political government.⁽³⁵⁾ NGO representatives frequently came to TV talk shows to discuss the socio-political problems and election-related issues after the coup.

It is true that the post-cold war environment, US strategic thinking and discourses, US-India partnership, the rise of China all are relevant in understanding the overthrow of a consolidated democracy. But bringing in gender can illuminate hitherto concealed aspects of such interventions justified through very masculine strategic thinking and rhetoric. Efforts at regime change failed. Even towards the end of the first year, the supporters of the coup started rambling that it was a miserable failure. The coup coalition felt an established democracy like Bangladesh could be weaker than it seemed because of the gender strategies in hand to eliminate these leaders. The hierarchic, dichotomous thinking of the West concluded that the chaotic politics of Bangladesh had to go. The gender of the two leaders proved a vulnerability of Bangladesh politics.⁽³⁶⁾ The negative portrayal of South Asian women leaders is reflected in the comments of a former American ambassador to Bangladesh when he said that these women were of low calibre and devoid of education and sophisticated thinking.⁽³⁷⁾ Gender was not only implicated in why it was planned but also in the implementation strategies.

Gender and collapse of the democratic order

Gender dichotomies privilege the first term in a dichotomy and equates the second term with femininity and valorizes the first or the male term. Some of the dichotomies prevalent in societies are: mind/body, subject/object, order/chaos, reason/emotion, etc.⁽³⁸⁾ Feminist scholars stress that in these dichotomies the second term is associated with women and thus women represent body and chaos. Powerful and imperial states have deployed gender against smaller powerless states in the modern era. The West, particularly Britain and the US, have used gender as a weapon in multiple ways against the Third World and, after 9/11, the Muslim countries.⁽³⁹⁾ Writing on colonialism and militarism, many writers have explained how people from the developing or marginalized societies in the world system have been feminized and devalued as the disorderly, irrational, emotional people in need of enlightenment.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This is

how the targets of military interventions and interventionist wars have been constructed as the “other” or “feminine”. The disorderly (feminine), chaotic (feminine) Third World countries have to be rescued and civilized, democratized, and masculinized.

Prime minister Khaleda Zia handed over power on 27 October 2006, at the end of her government’s term and the next day chaos engulfed the capital city which was blamed on the unruly behaviour of the AL and the Jammāt-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB). Months later journalists and commentators blamed the intelligence agencies for creating this chaos. The army chief, Moin U Ahmed, used this turmoil and the AL’s threatened boycott of the 22 January 2007 parliamentary election as the reasons for declaring emergency. Moin Ahmed called this ‘the impending civil war’ again and again in his memoir, a special TV interview, and press statements.⁽⁴¹⁾ As noted earlier, Bangladesh faced a similar crisis in 1995-96. Nothing like a civil war situation persisted in 2007.⁽⁴²⁾

Some Bangladeshi analysts have seen this collapse as a result of structural forces of the international system. A prominent Bangladeshi scholar told the author that the US wanted a docile government in Bangladesh after the onset of the war on terror, a government that would listen to the West as the Karzai government in Afghanistan or the Musharraf government in Pakistan did. The governing party in Bangladesh, at the time, the BNP, is known as a pro-American party. Yet, the Khaleda Zia government, being an elected government, could not turn into an obedient puppet. The flowering Indo-US partnership made the BNP an obstacle to the US against the backdrop of the rise of China as a major power, said this scholar. India teamed up with the US because it had its own foreign policy agenda regarding Bangladesh. This agenda included transit through Bangladesh to India’s Northeastern states, the troubled ‘seven sisters.’ India also wanted Bangladesh not to aid Indian separatists. Because of the Indo-US partnership now the partners could work together to install a likable government. Bangladesh could thus become an ally against China and the spread of Chinese influence in South Asia could be held in check.⁽⁴³⁾ Another explanation sees this collapse as a result of the American war against terror which did not favour the BNP government allied with an Islamic party, the Jamaat-e-Islami.⁽⁴⁴⁾

These explanations illuminate the situation to an extent. But by overemphasizing the war against terror they tilt towards what Western policy makers themselves give as justification for their intervention in Third World countries during the Bush period. It is better to bring in long-term forces behind policies of the United States and its allies. Gender is one such long-term factor. It should also be mentioned that the BNP leaders called it a measure against democratic rule in Bangladesh and the BNP as the ruling party.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The AL government is now signalling that it also believes that 1/11 (the 11 January intervention) was indeed a result of long planning.⁽⁴⁶⁾

It is not only the Bangladeshi scholars and observers but also some Western media outlets which observed that the coup in 2007 was widely supported by the West.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Bangladesh was descending into chaos and the

military appeared as the saviour. This theme appeared again and again in the memoirs of Moin Ahmed and in talk shows held to support the military government. As Peterson has noted, “Military, of course, are quintessential sites of hyper masculinity.”⁽⁴⁸⁾ Long-term Western tendencies to deploy gender as a weapon and use gender binaries to frame its interventions must not be overlooked. The devalued femininity of the two women prime ministers should not be neglected. The two leaders are often portrayed as the “bickering begums”, “batling begums”, “squabbling begums” who hate each other.⁽⁴⁹⁾ All these terms refer to horrible feminine disorder against masculine propriety and order that the intervention was going to establish. Clearly and emphatically, *The Economist* blamed the two women saying “Both *women* are to blame for this *mess*.”⁽⁵⁰⁾ A supporter of the coup stressed that the country needed to be governed with strong (masculine) hands.⁽⁵¹⁾ The leader/woman dichotomy was used by the military regime to justify the intervention as well as the steps taken by the regime in the aftermath.

The intelligence services deliberately created violence and turbulence to justify the civil war theme in the propaganda. But chaos was also raised as an important issue in two different ways to justify imposition of discipline on Bangladesh politics. The two political parties were engaged hopelessly in confrontational politics. They did not agree, they did not cooperate, and they did not even understand how rapidly Bangladesh would prosper economically if they could quiet it down and start behaving like adults.⁽⁵²⁾ Another important way the chaos theme operated was: these two major parties enjoyed keeping wounds open in the national body politic. And this theme was built around the issue of the national leaders, an extremely important issue. Each party feels its leader is the most important one in Bangladesh. The army chief paid homage to both leaders and said that there should be respect paid to both of them from now on to ensure peace and unity for the nation.

Removing two women leaders at the same time

The coup was an attempt to remove two popular leaders of two major parties which had governed a very large nation as democratically elected governments. Explaining such a complex intervention is difficult, if not impossible, in an article-length study. The paper has already shown that strategic thinking that plans to subjugate non-Western people is itself gendered. Gender was not only working at the basic level of dichotomous thinking of policymakers, it also came into play in other ways generating the belief that certain gender strategies would work in a country like Bangladesh. The intervention was, in addition to being influenced by gender and discourse-driven, influenced by the coincidence of US-India interests resulting from economic and strategic changes in the world.

The rise of China increased Bangladesh’s strategic importance to the United States as the then secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, emphasized.⁽⁵³⁾ The prime minister’s adviser for foreign affairs also has described Bangladesh as having grown strategically more important to the US.⁽⁵⁴⁾ India felt its partnership

with the US and a changed regime could ensure transit through Bangladesh to its North-Eastern states, long sought by India and denied by the successive Bangladesh governments because of public opinion and security reasons. It was necessary, from the Western perspective, to have a rational, technocratic, obedient government. Bangladesh seemed an easy target partly because of the 'gender relations' existing in a poor, Muslim, developing country, and the gender strategies that were available to the coup coalition. The coup coalition used certain gender strategies which reveal assumptions about the nature of femininity and masculinity as operating in Bangladesh.

A combination of strategies was used to enact and legitimize a regime change. At the rhetorical level, a two-track policy came into play. It was stressed that the government came to power to save the country from civil war and it would not stay a day longer than was necessary. On the other hand, it kept emphasizing the need for fundamental reforms in the political system which obviously requires a long time to enact and implement.⁽⁵⁵⁾ This two-track rhetoric was used in the sections of the media supporting the coup and the military government. Prominent among these media outlets were: The daily *Prothom Alo*, the *Daily Star*, the *Daily Inquilab*, BTV (the government channel); Channel I, ATN etc.

A media campaign was unleashed to discredit the women leaders. The "transgression theme" was prominent. Both of them were transgressors. Such portrayal points at women not being natural leaders. The media alleged that they were in power only because they were related to the famous deceased leaders. Once in power they were both very autocratic thinking they owned the country and the party.⁽⁵⁶⁾ One speaker went so far as to say that even Saddam Hussein of Iraq showed respect to the Baath Party, and Hitler to his generals but these two leaders did not respect anyone.⁽⁵⁷⁾ They bankrupted the country, said Moinul Hussein, a member of the CTG.⁽⁵⁸⁾ All this is serious transgressions by women. Such aggression from women would not be acceptable in most cultures. Exemplary punishment was called for. Given the subordinate nature of women in a Muslim-majority Third World country, the coup coalition felt, there would be widespread revulsion against these whimsical and authoritarian usurpers. Such thinking emanates from the Western feminist discourses which see Third World women as victims of severe male oppression. Some have challenged such description of victimization that invites Western intervention in the form of aid programmes, female leadership programmes, and military interventions.⁽⁵⁹⁾

The punishment of the transgressors was another major theme. There were frequent talks about catching the "Big Fish" so that a lesson could be taught to all the corrupt elements in the society. The 'Big Fish,' of course, were the two leaders. The very masculine hand of the military was going to clean up the mess; a surgical operation was needed, people were told. There would be a clear and final break with the past. Thus the masculine/feminine dichotomy or clarity/mess, cleanliness/dirt dichotomies were deployed.⁽⁶⁰⁾ The precise and powerful hand of the army and its international backers were going to wipe clean the slate.⁽⁶¹⁾ Some sections of the media showed Tareq Zia, Khaleda Zia's son whom she groomed to be the future leader, captured by the police as a

serious criminal. And then commentator after commentator talked about how Khaleda Zia nurtured this corrupt son.⁽⁶²⁾ The media campaign was not only local but the global Western media also pitched in. *The Economist* joined in saying since the military had stepped on the tails of the ‘Snakes’ they must crush the Snakes’ heads, meaning they must eliminate the leaders.⁽⁶³⁾

The regime tried to enact a leader/woman dichotomy. Although it kept stressing that it just wanted to hold a fair election, very soon it started talking about getting rid of the two leaders. Both the leaders were arrested and put in a sub-jail, a building on the parliament complex. They were effectively in solitary confinement as an observer noted.⁽⁶⁴⁾ The leaders themselves felt that they were being severely punished as women. The AL published a book with the title “*Sheikh Hasina in Solitary Confinement for 331 Days*”. Sheikh Hasina has written that her quarters in the sub-jail were horribly dirty, without even proper beddings for her to sleep on. How she described her incarceration is significant: “I am imprisoned; so alone on the second floor... They kept me in jail for 11 months, in solitary confinement.” Khaleda Zia commented that her solitary confinement seriously affected her.⁽⁶⁵⁾ It was hoped exile would be preferred to such imprisonment. Benazir Bhutto was also in a similar sub-jail and felt the military metes out harsher punishment to women.

Both her sons, especially Tareq Zia, were used against Khaleda Zia as gendered weapons. Tareq was arrested on corruption and money-laundering charges and then seriously tortured in custody. Arafat Rahman, the second son, became very sick while in custody. Women leaders are very much aware that such punishment is designed for them. The current prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, clearly hinted at this when she said about the opposition leader Khaleda Zia, “Doesn’t she remember what that government did to her sons?”⁽⁶⁶⁾ *The Economist* viewed Tareq’s arrest as an attempt to blackmail Khaleda Zia, a mother.⁽⁶⁷⁾ The effort was also to show Khaleda Zia, whom her supporters considered to be the fiery uncompromising leader, was really a doting mother who did not have any control over her children thus bringing into play the leader/woman dichotomy.

Attempts were afoot to form a ‘King’s party’ to govern the country. The government planned to exile both the leaders. Sheikh Hasina went to visit family in the US in March, 2007, while attempts were made to remove Khaleda Zia from Bangladesh. The drama that ensued from these attempts kept Bangladeshis captivated. At one point journalists camped at the airport waiting to see Khaleda Zia board a plane. Khaleda Zia did not agree to leave, Sheikh Hasina also desired to come back home from the United States to face charges in her country. She was barred from returning by the government but managed to come back. The leaders were first proved corrupt and nurturing and protecting the corrupt like evil matriarchs. And now the military was getting rid of them. Many commentators talked about how the parties would cast them aside once they were out of the country. This evil witch (very feminine) imagery anchored the party reform plan.

That solitary confinement would break the women, her son's fate would make Khaleda Zia obey, were believed very strongly by the government and its media and NGO supporters. Mother identity of Bangladeshi women is the most important identity as is the case with Latin American countries. Obviously these attempts were being made against the discursive constructions of women leaders. Any careful observer of the politics of these two leaders could tell that such an attempt would fail. Khaleda Zia said after her release that she never agreed to leave the country. *The Economist* simply could not believe that the attempt had failed.⁽⁶⁸⁾ The all-pervasive media campaign with its strong gender overtones and gendered punishment were some of the important strategies.

Conclusion

A well-planned and strongly supported, by foreign and domestic forces, coup took place breaking down the democratic order in Bangladesh. Bangladesh faced crises, such as the one preceding the coup, before. Although the interim government installed by the coup said that it was in power to hold a free and fair election in the country, it unveiled strategies to plant a military-supported government for a long time to come which means major realignments of internal and external security concerns. The two women leaders of the two major political parties were targeted for exile and incarcerated. Bangladesh was subjected to gendered categorization by the West which supported the 11 January changeover. Hegemonic elite perceptions and discourses prevailing in various fields of study, e.g. leadership studies, women's studies, and political science, influenced Western policymakers, implementers, and Bangladeshi military planners. The coup, as other military interventions in Third World countries, had important gender dimensions and used potent and well thought-out gender strategies. The paper has attempted to analyze some of the more salient gender dimensions focusing on the justification, legitimization, and consolidation strategies of the military regime. This was done with the hope of drawing attention to how gender underpins important political phenomena as democratic breakdown, struggle for democratization, and party politics. The backdrop of the rise of China and India's alliance with the US as a major factor also deserves attention.

Notes and References

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27. Supporters of the military intervention said that the military government could come to power because there was UN support. *Trityo Matra* (Third Dimension), 28 March 2007, Channel I. Many Bangladeshi observers accused the UNDP of encouraging the coup through this letter.
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 33. The pro-coup intellectual stated that he was sent to Khaleda Zia towards the end of her government's term, to talk and Khaleda Zia did not agree with him. Author's interview, 1 April 2011. That Khaleda Zia wanted the political process, however chaotic, to continue is clear. In her answer to the question why she went to an election which gave her party only thirty seats, she said, "The unelected rulers had to be ousted", author's conversation with Khaleda Zia, 24 May 2011.
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48. Peterson, "Thinking through", p.18.
49. *The Economist* often referred to the two Bangladeshi leaders using these terms. See *The Economist* "No Going Back", 21 April 2007.
50. Italics mine. *The Economist*, "The Clean-up." 10 November 2007.
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