CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSIONS

The Bangladesh military which was the lineal descendant of the British Indian Army and the Pakistan armed forces, was transformed during the liberation struggle into a nationalist army. However, in the immediate post-liberation period, no attempt was made for building a large armed force in Bangladesh. The new political leadership argued that in a poor and under-developed country like Bangladesh, a large standing army would mean an unnecessary financial burden on an already impoverished peasant economy. This view was, however, contested by the top military echelons. They argued that it was important to maintain the existing strength of the military and even to expand it in order to defend the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, contrary to their expectations, the country's defence establishment was reduced to police keeping and largely ceremonial role during the Mujib period. Consequently, civil-military relations in Bangladesh was never easy when Sheikh Mujib was in power.

The period between 1972-75 was marked by systemic weaknesses and performance failures of the Awami League regime. Apart from the inept handling of the armed forces, Sheikh Mujib committed several other mistakes as well. Growing economic crises, social and political instability, widespread corruption and mismanagement and excessive use of coercive measures alienated the regime from the common people and eroded much of its legitimacy.

Anti-Awami League feeling among the people in general and the armed forces in particular was carefully exploited by disgruntled and hostile political groups, both within and outside the Awami League. This motivated the already politicised army to intervene
in politics. On August 15, 1975, Sheikh Mujib was brutally murdered with most of his family members, by a section of junior army officers, and his government was overthrown.

The August 1975 coup was followed by a series of coups and counter coups and severe internecine conflicts within the armed forces. Finally by the end of 1975, Ziaur Rahman emerged as the leader of the Bangladesh Army. Zia's accession to and consolidation of power was a turning point in the country's politics as it marked the beginning of military rule in Bangladesh. Under the Zia regime, the civil-military bureaucratic elite asserted itself, consolidated its position and started dominating the decision making process.

However, during the Zia period, the Bangladesh armed forces, in spite of their homogenous ethnic origin, were deeply afflicted by internal schisms and factionalism. They were divided both on ideological and personal grounds. The two major factions within the armed forces included the repatriates and the freedom fighters. Compared to the freedom fighters, who were highly politicised, exuberant and full of ideological fervour, the repatriates retained much of the conservative outlook that characterised the armed forces in Pakistan.

Zia favoured the repatriates and inducted many of them into the decision making process. But this was not liked by the freedom fighters who claimed that they had spearheaded and sustained the actual liberation struggle and that therefore, they should be given a share in the national decision making process. They tried to dislodge Zia from power through numerous coups and mutinies. But Zia was able to suppress them for most part of his regime. In the process of consolidating his power, Zia reportedly
executed about 800 military personnel for their alleged involvement in various coups and counter coups. Moreover, several others were summarily dismissed from service.

Despite such efforts, Zia failed to contain the highly politicised Bangladesh armed forces. He was assassinated on May 30, 1981 in an abortive coup alleged to have been engineered by the Chittagong garrison commander Major General M.A. Manzoor, a Liberation War hero. Zia's assassination is regarded as the last attempt of the freedom fighters to capture state power. Manzoor's rebellion was ruthlessly suppressed. In a major purge, hundreds of freedom fighters were forcibly retired.

Following Zia's assassination, the military facilitated the civilian succession process and Justice Abdus Sattar was installed as new President. But at the same time, Lt. General Ershad, the then Army Chief, demanded that a constitutionally guaranteed role should be accorded to the Bangladesh armed forces. When President Sattar refused to share power with the military, Lt. General Ershad overthrew his government in a bloodless coup on March 24, 1982. Under his leadership, the senior repatriated officers reasserted their authority. They dominated the policy-making apparatus till the end of the Ershad regime.

After the establishment of military rule in 1975, Bangladesh witnessed a complete reversal of its defence policy. The country's first military ruler – Ziaur Rahman, took several steps to rebuild the military and restore its esprit de corps. He raised the pay scales of all ranks, reorganised the military academy and the staff college, provided overseas training, improved the training facilities for the enlisted ranks and almost doubled the size of the armed forces. The process of military institution building, particularly in the field of training initiated by Zia, was intensified during the Ershad period. Unlike Zia, nine years of rule by Ershad, had been characterised by the
conspicuous absence of any abortive coup or uprising among the soldiers. He also restored a measure of discipline among the rank and file of the army. They were professionally more competent during his regime than in the past.

Since 1975, the military has been involved in a variety of activities ranging from disaster management to the defence of the political order. Zia began to induct both the serving and retired military officers into the civilian organisations such as police, state corporations, and foreign service. The process of militarisation of the civilian administration was accelerated under Ershad. Thus, it can be said that the role expansion of the armed forces was a direct fallout of the prolonged military rule.

After 1975, the Bangladesh military not only increased in size but also underwent a change in its class composition. Although recruitment to the military profession became more socially representative – the officer corps developed an elitist outlook primarily because of its cadet college background. In Bangladesh, cadet colleges are the exclusive domain of the privileged sections of the society and are generally isolated from the mainstream educational institutions. Military’s relation with other elite groups – urban professionals, land owners, emerging business and industrial bourgeoisie also became closer. Officer corps were drawn mainly from these classes. Thus, the military as an integral part of the propertied classes always tried to protect and promote their interests while in power.

Fifteen years of military rule also destroyed the natural institution building process in Bangladesh. During 1975-90, intelligence organisations such as Defence Forces Intelligence (DFI) and National Security Intelligence (NSI) were used repeatedly for breaking existing political parties and creating new ones. The two major political
parties of Bangladesh – BNP and Jatiyo Party were created from the cantonment. This was the political culture which Bangladesh inherited from its former rulers of Pakistan.

The military regimes of Zia and Ershad tried to legitimise their rule through various democratic facades like holding referendums, and presidential, parliamentary and local body elections. In spite of all these, unaccountability remained a persisting problem under the military rulers, particularly Ershad. He prolonged his rule mainly by manipulating election results. Intelligence agencies were reported to have been used for vote rigging and other electoral malpractices. These acts impeded the process of democratic institution-building in Bangladesh.

The military regimes were marked by martial law rules and regulations, press censorship and curtailment of civil liberties. Under military rule, the office of the chief executive or president was made omnipotent. Political institutions were created to serve the purposes of the all-powerful president. The judiciary was often made subservient to the executive and the rule of law was severely undermined. The constitution of Bangladesh was amended several times to legitimise martial law proclamations. The parliament was never allowed to function independently. It was used to endorse policies and programmes initiated by the military regimes. The bureaucracy was over-centralised, politicised and corrupted.

The prolonged military rule also weakened the party system in Bangladesh. The military rulers frequently intimidated the opposition leaders and imposed several restrictions on the activities of political parties. As a result, the political parties had little opportunity to ensure popular participation in the political process.

All these steps were deeply resented by the civilian population. Bangladesh has had a long tradition of organising mass movements against authoritarian rules. The
country witnessed such mass upsurge in the late 1980s, which culminated in the military’s withdrawal from power in 1990.

After Ershad’s ouster, military has restrained itself from playing any political role. The present military leadership is aware that there is a consensus for civilian rule in the country. Military officers now prefer to join the civilian government to express their opinions. A large number of retired military officers contested the February 1991 parliamentary elections. All the leading political parties have considerable following among the retired armed personnel. Their increased participation in the electoral process suggests that military has to a considerable extent been coopted into the democratic political process.

In the first ever free and fair election held after independence, the BNP was voted to power. In the new democratic set up, the post-1975 model of civil-military relations were restructured. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia took the charge of the Ministry of Defence. The Armed Forces Division, which controls the functioning of the three Service headquarters was made subordinate to the Prime Minister’s Secretariat. Several senior repatriate officers including formation commanders perceived to be loyal to the former military ruler Ershad were compulsorily retired.

Zia did succeed to some extent in restoring the political stability of Bangladesh by partially civilianising the polity. However, while laying the foundations of post-1975 polity, Zia modified the fundamental principles of the 1972 Constitution and rehabilitated the anti-liberation forces who in return offered much needed support to the military regime.

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Among the constitutional amendments, Zia discarded secularism, a legacy of the Mujib period, and introduced the concept of "absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah". His successor – Ershad, sought to Islamise the polity further by declaring Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh. Ershad was obliged to hasten the Islamisation process after he failed to resolve the legitimacy crisis by electoral means. The Islamisation measures had far-reaching implications consequences for the Bangladesh society. Among others, they disturbed social harmony and adversely affected the most vulnerable segments of the society – the women, and religious and ethnic minorities.

Another outcome of the military rule was the reversal of Sheikh Mujib’s socialist policies. Since 1975, the policy was to encourage the private sector. The military rulers by pursuing denationalisation, disinvestment and liberalised trade policies, succeeded in drawing Bangladesh within the orbit of the world capitalist economy. Such a revival of state-sponsored capitalism of the pre-liberation days bred a class of "lumpen capitalist" who was interested more in the appropriation of scarce resources rather than utilising them for productive investment in various sectors of the economy.

Successive military regimes also did not make any determined effort to mobilise domestic resources. This resulted in the country’s increasing dependence on foreign capital. In Bangladesh, more than 80% of all developmental programmes were till recently financed through foreign assistance in the form of loans and grants. However, the massive inflows of foreign assistance did not percolate down to the lowest strata of the society—the dispossessed class in the rural sector. On most occasions, these
resources were appropriated by the intermediaries and commission agents. These forces came to acquire a vital stake in an aid-dependent economy.

To win support for their regimes, both Zia and Ershad liberally distributed state patronages and encouraged corruption at all levels of the government and administration. It was Zia who institutionalised corruption in Bangladesh. Though personally free of corruption, Zia accepted it as a fact of life. Most of his cabinet colleagues and other key functionaries were thoroughly corrupt. Under Ershad, corruption and nepotism reached unprecedented heights. Independent investigations reveal that Ershad himself was involved in a number of financial irregularities. Due to rampant corruption, the entire social and moral fabric of the nation was weakened during the Ershad’s rule.

The socio-economic performance of the military regimes was far from satisfactory. The investment and expenditure policies of the military regimes were lopsided and irrational. Large scale investment in the defence and other unproductive sectors seriously affected the overall efficiency of the economy. Besides, the military rulers’ private sector-oriented industrial policy did not lead to an expansion of industrial production and creation of enough job opportunities for the unemployed youth. The rural development policies and programmes, too, contributed little to eradicating poverty or to improve in any significant way the conditions of the rural population. The government’s input subsidisation programmes and privatisation of public distribution mechanism largely benefited the rich peasantry. The land reform measures introduced from above failed to protect the rights and interests of the landless workers, marginal farmers and tenant farmers. They only helped in increasing polarisation and pauperisation in the rural society.
The restoration of civilian rule has not led to any significant change in the rural and urban power structures. The socio-economic aspirations of the ruling elite consisting of industrialists, large traders, civil bureaucrats, rural rich and urban professionals are not too dissimilar from that of the military which it has replaced. Along with the armed forces personnel, these groups benefited from the prolonged military rule. They are unlikely to surrender their privileged positions.