

The Battle for Bengal: Regional Resonance

Written by Indrajit Roy

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INDRAJIT ROY, APR 7 2021

A heated political battle is brewing in the Indian State of West Bengal. Its people are voting to elect members to the Legislative Assembly, the body responsible for social and economic decisions in the Indian States. Under India's federal constitution, States wield wide-ranging powers over such matters as police and public order; education and health; and agriculture, industry and State public services. Additionally, States are responsible for implementing several decisions taken by India's national parliament. Control over the Legislative Assembly of a State is thus crucial in the formulation of sub-national policy as well as implementing national policy. Although Union-State relations have been crucial to India's relations with its neighbouring countries, their role has been relatively neglected in the literature on foreign policy analysis and sub-national politics (Alden and Brummer, 2019; Blarel and van Willingen, 2017; Blarel and van Willingen, 2020).

The 'Battle for Bengal' is significant for the Indo-Pacific region. The ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) positions itself as a left-populist formation. In power since 2011, the Chief Minister of the State, Mamata Banerjee is fiercely federal in her outlook. She has positioned herself as a defender of her State's interests against New Delhi's centralising tendencies. Challenging her dominance in the State is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party that has governed India since 2014 and was re-elected with a thumping majority in May 2019. Under the charismatic Narendra Modi as Prime Minister, the BJP has fashioned itself as a party of the Hindu Right, having recently redeemed its long-standing promise of constructing a grand temple dedicated to Lord Rama in a disputed site in the north Indian town of Ayodhya if elected to power. As the electoral contest in this eastern Indian State, abutting Bangladesh heats up, it would be worthwhile to consider its ramifications for the broader region.

Religious polarisation and the legacy of the Long Partition

The elections have been conducted amidst deteriorating relations between the State's Hindu and Muslim populations. Religious polarisation between the two communities has become acute in recent years as the BJP strives to extend its footprint in the State on the back of discontentment among Hindu refugees fleeing religious persecution from neighbouring Bangladesh. Both West Bengal and Bangladesh comprised the Bengal province of British India till 1947. That year, as Britain was forced to recognise Indian Independence, and the country's Hindu and Muslim communities failed to agree on power-sharing arrangements, the sub-continent was partitioned between Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. The religious basis of the Partition entailed the division of Bengal province, whose predominantly Muslim eastern districts were awarded to Pakistan and the Hindu majority western districts to India. East Bengal eventually seceded from Pakistan in 1971 to establish the People's Republic of Bangladesh while West Bengal is today a State in the Union of India. The Partition triggered an orgy of violence and one of the largest mass migrations in history as Muslims fled India for Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs the opposite direction. Such migrations continued long after the two nation-states came into being, exacerbated by the military crackdown of the Pakistani army on East Bengali civilians that specifically targeted the region's Hindu minority during the summer of 1971. Echoes of those population movements continue to reverberate in the region as India's Hindu nationalists capitalise on refugees' quest for citizenship.

In December 2019, India's Parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that discriminated between Muslim and non-Muslim applicants for citizenship from Muslim-majority Bangladesh as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Led by Union Home Minister Amit Shah, supporters of the legislation frequently invoked the legacy of the

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Partition, and repeatedly called attention to the persecutions faced by Hindu minorities in these countries. Shah promised parliament as well as audiences during political rallies and press conferences that the Amendment will be followed by the enumeration of a controversial National Register of Citizens (NRC). Indians will now have to prove their citizenship by providing certain documents so they could be enlisted in the NRC: failure to do so could result in detention as 'illegal immigrant' and possibly deportation. Although the legislation was couched as providing succour to persecuted minorities in India's neighbourhood, the BJP's ill-concealed Hindu supremacist worldview has resulted in justified anxiety among critics that the CAA, in conjunction with the NRC, will in fact be used to target India's 200 million Muslims. Not covered under the ambit of the CAA, they could find themselves disenfranchised and stateless if they are not able to prove their citizenship. The NRC registry is already in process in the neighbouring state of Assam and has left nearly 1.9 million people stateless.

Nevertheless, the CAA has been largely welcomed by West Bengal's Hindu refugees and their descendants, for whom it offers the prospect of obtaining and/or confirming Indian citizenship. As members of communities labelled 'low caste' many of these refugees also suffered caste-based discrimination, from which the BJP's project of constructing a monolithic Hindu community offers escape and equality. The BJP has promised to implement the CAA in West Bengal should it be elected to power.

These prospects have strained Hindu-Muslim relations in this sensitive border State. After several decades of relative communal amity, incidents of tensions between the two communities have begun to rise in the second decade of the present century. Although the surge in inter-communal violence predates Modi's ascendance to power in 2014, relations between the two communities appear to have nosedived since the BJP's re-election in May 2019. That year, the BJP won 18 of 42 seats allocated to the State in the national parliament- up from two in 2014. Although the TMC continued to rule the State, the BJP's emergence as the foremost challenger to its dominance could hardly be ignored. The BJP's espousal of the CAA lends it an edge among the refugee populations. The TMC's opposition to the CAA has significantly contributed to its popularity among the State's beleaguered Muslim population, which fears it will be unfairly targeted by the legislation. Even a cursory glance at the electoral campaign suggests the extent of communal polarisation that has permeated the State's politics. The BJP has accused Chief Minister Banerjee of appeasing Muslims and striving to create a 'Greater Bangladesh'. Such communal polarisation bears a resemblance to the religious violence that plagued British Bengal in the lead-up to Independence, illustrated by such ghastly episodes as the Great Calcutta Killings of August 1946.

Regional instability

Irrespective of which party wins, the divisive electoral campaign will strain Hindu-Muslim relations for years to come. The religious filter of the CAA is likely to cause large-scale turmoil in the region. Despite Home Minister Amit Shah's assurance that the CAA will not target Indian Muslims and will only be used to identify 'illegal infiltrators', the onus of proving citizenship rests on the individuals. Furthermore, local bureaucrats enjoy enormous discretion in approving and verifying citizenship claims, leading to anxieties that West Bengal's Muslims will bear a disproportionate brunt while proving their citizenship. Many such individuals will likely to be dubbed Bangladeshi nationals who the government may attempt to 'deport' to that country.

Any such move is likely to exacerbate tensions between the two communities if India begins to identify Muslim individuals it claims are 'illegal infiltrators' and seeks to deport them to Bangladesh. As president of the BJP back in 2018, Shah invoked dehumanising imagery to describe these 'illegal infiltrators', prompting swift response from that country. In the absence of any reliable data on the actual number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in India, both countries are likely to contest any claims on this issue. There are few reasons to expect Bangladesh to accept such individuals as its own citizens: Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina politely indicated as such. For one thing, such movements of population are likely to strengthen the growing Islamist social movements in that country. Second, Bangladesh already hosts thousands of Rohingya refugees from neighbouring Myanmar and is unlikely to be able to cope with more strain on its resources. Finally, Its impressive recent economic development notwithstanding, the economically fragile Bengal delta is especially vulnerable to the unfolding climate crisis. Bangladesh already faces an internal migration crisis due to climate change. Population transfers from West Bengal is sure to destabilise relations between Bangladesh and India.

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Undermining a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'

Unstable relations between India and Bangladesh will hinder the success of emerging visions of the Indo-Pacific, an idea first conceived in 2006–7. The term is credited to Dr Gurpreet Khurana, executive director of the National Maritime Foundation and a captain of the Indian Navy who coined it as an expression of shared anxieties between India and Japan over China's rising assertiveness in Asia and beyond. With the United States becoming interested in exploring alliances in the context of its own competition with China, the term has now gained geopolitical significance. Despite varying interpretations, most considerations of the Indo-Pacific are based on the imagination of the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean as one contiguous area through which the majority's goods and energy supplies are transported. Many observers perceive the Indo-Pacific as an alternative to the multi-trillion dollar Belt and Road Initiative that criss-crosses Eurasia. Barack Obama had outlined plans for an Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor during his second presidency. Donald Trump extended this vision when he declared his support for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific at the 2017 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation. Building on those early initiatives, US President Joe Biden recently committed to a free, open, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region in a rare op-ed in the *Washington Post* penned together with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga.

Bangladesh, a member of the China-led Belt and Road Initiative, has so far resisted joining the security and development umbrella of the Indo-Pacific. The country's impressive rates of human development should make it a natural partner for India's own rapid strides in economic growth and poverty-reduction. Bangladesh is a valued partner in India's fight against militancy in its troubled north-east. Indeed, India's role in the founding of Bangladesh, well-recognised by that country's political elites, can be expected to cement the friendship between them. However, prospects for such friendship are easily threatened, as evidenced from recent protests against Modi's visit to Bangladesh. The religious polarisation fomented by politicians in both countries threatens to curb not only developmental partnership between the two countries but any promise of freedom and openness in the Indo-Pacific.

Further research agenda

At the time of writing West Bengal has completed the first two phases of polling and will continue polling in six more phases until 29 April. The results of the West Bengal elections are likely to impact not only the 100 million people residing in this State but also the 163 million people inhabiting neighbouring Bangladesh. Religious polarisation is likely to lead to destabilise relations between India and Bangladesh, resulting in wider regional instability. Bangladesh may remain reluctant to join the Indo-Pacific security umbrella if it perceives unfair population pressures from India. Under the circumstances, the prospects for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' may remain remote. Some of these themes offer fruitful arenas for further research in order to have a better understanding of the implications of sub-national politics on foreign policy analysis by drawing on global (rather than Eurocentric) cases.

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About the author:

Dr Indrajit Roy is a Senior Lecturer of Global Development Politics at the Department of Politics, University of York. He leads a global consortium of scholars and practitioners to study the ongoing reimagining of citizenship in India, supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). He has curated a podcast series titled 'India Tomorrow' for *The Conversation* on the eve of India's 2019 Elections. The curation is forthcoming as *Passionate Politics: Democracy, development and India's 2019 General Elections* with Manchester University Press. A sample of his recent public writings are available here, here and here.

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