

Bengal's toothless tigers

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THE IMPORTANT question now about the war in East **Pakistan** is not whether **Bangla Desh** will at some stage achieve independence but whether it will achieve it under the leadership of the Awami League and the Bengali upper class or under Marxist leadership. Already the bourgeois world of the Bengali elite has been shattered irretrievably and it remains to be seen whether this class of officials and businessmen has the energy and drive to remain in control of the struggle for independence.

Talking to a young assistant commissioner in Faridpur in East Bengal I noticed on his table a John Braine novel and a booklet entitled "Graduate Register of the CSP" (civil service of **Pakistan**). Seeing me glance at them, he said with a smile that the novel was not particularly good and that as for the CSP the only question was how long it would continue to exist in any recognisable form.

For this young man after the grind of university and success in the highly competitive examinations governing entry to the CSP, the war in Bengal was not only a national tragedy but a sudden disruption of his personal hopes and prospects. As a Bengali he could not see himself in the future working as a collaborator for some West **Pakistan** puppet regime. As a realist he thought it hardly likely that he would soon be able to resume his career as the servant of a democratic government in an independent Bengal.

The West **Pakistan** authorities are now apparently

grubbing around among unsuccessful politicians from other parties than the Awami League in an attempt to produce some feeble show of Bengali support. They are said to be having difficulty even with this unrepresentative group. And one simply cannot see more than a handful of the Bengali "official" class returning to their duties under a Punjabi occupation regime, let alone any Awami League politicians. Quite apart from any other considerations such men would run the risk of assassination.

It seems very unlikely that the Pakistani Army will not succeed in re-establishing control over most of the country within the next few weeks, even though early monsoon rains may hamper their activities. But whether after that they will immediately face a serious guerrilla movement is a difficult question to answer.

Advantages

In the first place the terrain in the Western part of the country at least (in contrast to the Chittagong hill country and parts of the area north of Dacca) does not necessarily favour guerrilla activities, in or out of the monsoon. The monsoon will bring advantages to the liberation fighters, but while it closes one network of communications to the Pakistani army — the roads — it will open another. By launch and gunboat the Pakistani army will be able to reach most parts of the country.

As to sanctuary areas it is claimed that India will provide them and to an extent

she probably will. But the Indian Government has to dice with the prospect of a new Indo-Pakistani war that might conceivably bring in China. So she is likely to continue to be extremely cautious in supporting the Bengalis.

Apart from geographical disadvantages there has of course been absolutely none of the intensive organisation of the countryside characterising the Vietcong or the Algerian liberation movement. There has hardly been time for it, but it is also true that the **Bangla Desh** leaders, officials and professional men in the main, are not particularly suited to such a task. The Bengali peasant may have his preferences and in the last few weeks they have clearly been for an independent Bengal, but he also has the peasant's natural inclination to avoid trouble when things get really rough. Nevertheless he remains ripe material for revolution but the problem is for whose revolution?

Most educated Bengalis are, at least in their rhetoric, liberal democrats of a type virtually extinct in the third world outside the Indian subcontinent. Some of the younger men are vaguely leftist and many of these believe that the Communists, and probably the Naxalite Communists of West Bengal, will take over the leadership in the countryside if the struggle for independence carries on for more than a short time. A young engineer in Jhenda told me: "Ultimately Bengal will go to the Communists if the Awami League fails. The Naxalites are already infiltrating and they are not fighting with us

but organising the countryside. The most urgent thing is that this fight should stop soon and the Awami League get power." Of course such warning are one of the ploys used by Bengalis to worry the West into helping them. But they seem to believe them as well.

Whether a non-Communist liberation movement could successfully organise the countryside thus remains unclear. Then there is the fact that in some places **Bangla Desh** forces have put up less than a stout resistance to the Pakistani army. There is a sort of general prejudice against Bengalis as fighters and a strong feeling that they are not among the martial races. The truth is that **Bangla Desh** forces have fought well in a few places in Bengal and that some will fight well in the next weeks as the Pakistani army moves to take the remaining towns in the "Free zone."

Difficulties

Against these difficulties — military inexperience, an unorganised peasantry, terrain disadvantages in some parts of the country, and the cautiousness of India — there is the fact that West **Pakistan** will probably turn out to be a less formidable opponent than others which liberation movements have had to face. There are the obvious logistic problems, which will continue to add to the difficulties of a government which has already suggested it will be very much an occupation regime. The economic life of East **Pakistan** — its jute industry, for instance — is already gravely disrupted and any worsening of economic

Martin Woollacott,
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conditions can only further alienate the people and help the liberation movement.

Finally there is the possibility and it is one upon which many Bengalis pin their best hopes, that West **Pakistan** itself will go into crisis. With over half its budget going on defence in normal times, the strain on any economy already in deep trouble could soon prove to be too much even if Western aid is not reduced or if China decides to help out financially in a big way. Unrest outside the Punjab could impose extra pressure on the over-stretched army as could power plays by ambitious generals who see a chance to displace President Yahya. Thus the proper policy for the Bengali liberation movement is to ensure that the **Pakistan** Government gets no cooperation at all from the Bengal educated and official classes, that guerrilla activity is kept up at least to the point where it permits no reduction of Pakistani forces, and that the West Pakistani authorities be denied any revenues from East Bengal even if this means further sabotaging the country's economy. In foreign affairs their priority should be to work on China. In the first three of these at least they have a reasonable chance of success and thus a reasonable hope of eventual victory. If victory is too long deferred, however, educated Bengalis are probably right in supposing that Communists of one sort or another will take over the leadership — and the triumph of communism in East Bengal could have repercussions for the entire subcontinent.



Home guard in Bangla Desh