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Book Review

Untranquil Recollections: Nation Building in Post-Liberation Bangladesh

Rehman Sobhan

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The Insulation of the Technocrat and the Power of the Politician

Rehman Sobhan returned to an independent Bangladesh on December 31, 1971, after spending nine challenging, yet exhilarating, months taking the cause of Bangladesh to cities around the world. The story of that endeavor, and that of his life and work leading to the momentous nine months of Bangladesh's war of independence, is told eloquently in the first volume of his memoirs, *Untranquil Recollections: Years of Fulfillment*. That volume ends on the day Sobhan returned to an independent Bangladesh.

The second volume, *Untranquil Recollections: Nation Building in Post-Liberation Bangladesh*, picks up the thread from there. In his inimitable prose, Rehman Sobhan talks about the optimism he felt as he woke up for the first time in independent Bangladesh: "I awoke on a cold New Year morning of 1972 with sunshine streaming through my windows, suffused with a sense of well-being and optimism. I was home in a liberated Bangladesh after nine months of tension and uncertainty where I had traversed the world as a soldier of Bangladesh with no expectation that I would arrive at journey's end any time soon." Four years later, he was to leave Bangladesh under very different circumstances. The second volume of his memoirs covers this phase of his life - from January 1, 1972, to December 31, 1975 - a phase that "began in hope but ended in darkness".

In this volume, Rehman Sobhan provides a very candid account of his experience working in the first government of Bangladesh, as Member of the Planning Commission with the rank of state minister and endowed with power that technocrats rarely enjoy. In this riveting book, Sobhan describes the working of the Commission and its relationship with the rest of government, at both institutional and individual levels. While others, such as Nurul Islam, have written on the subject in some detail, Sobhan's level of candor gives this account a different flavor, adding considerable value on top of earlier writings.

The 14 chapters of the book deal, *inter-alia*, with the setting up and working of the Planning Commission, the political economy of policy making, the challenges of delivering the five-year plan, the improvement of the performance of nationalized industries, and aid diplomacy and Indo-Bangladesh relations. The book was largely written during 1976-1978, when events were fresh in his mind, but the author has added a more recently written retrospective chapter at the end.

Sobhan's account of economic planning and management during that fateful period is valuable from at least two perspectives. First, it provides a deep understanding of an important period in the nation's history, particularly some important economic policy issues that the new government had to grapple with. Second, it provides rich insights into some perennial issues of economic management, including the dynamics between technocrats, politicians, and bureaucrats, and the challenges faced by the more proactive actors in government who work with a missionary zeal, as they confront a system unwilling to move at the same pace. This short review cannot do justice to all the important topics covered by the book. Given the paucity of space, it will focus on the second theme.

The book contributes to an understanding of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tajuddin Ahmed, other members of the cabinet, and the rest of the regime. Understanding Bangabandhu is an important agenda, and a project that needs to be rescued from the clutches of apologists and opportunists. Rehman Sobhan provides much food for thought in this regard, providing some answers, and raising some questions. He does the same with Tajuddin Ahmed, and some of the information he provides may go against conventional wisdom. The book also enhances our understanding of how the Planning Commission operated and the personalities involved. Sobhan's candid account of his colleagues, the leading players in the Commission, their different personalities, approaches, and ideologies, as well as the interactions among them, is indeed very valuable.

The members of the Planning Commission, appointed personally by Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, were asked to work out the details of the socialist economy that the political leadership aspired to. The socialist model was to be tailored to the reality of Bangladesh, not imported from abroad, and the planners were expected to delineate its main contours. That would be a challenging task in any context; it was even more so in a war-ravaged country with urgent need for relief and rehabilitation, a provincial administration that had to transform overnight to a national administration, a political leadership with very little administrative and policy making experience, and the building of important institutions, such as the Planning Commission, almost from scratch. Sobhan summarizes the challenge: "Serving in such a government was the equivalent of participating in a massive social experiment where from top to bottom we were all engaged in the task of learning our job by doing it."

On top of this, the Commission sought, and was granted, considerable authority to coordinate the work of various ministries. The Commission successfully argued that the policies of different ministries needed to be aligned with each other, and with the overarching goals of the government, and that projects undertaken by the ministries had to be consistent with such policies. This is true of all governments; it was even more so in the heavily resource-constrained situation of that time. As is clear from the book, this powerful role turned out to be a double-edged knife for the Commission.

The responsibility to work out the details of a socialist economy was a daunting one for at least two reasons. The government lacked knowledge of how socialist regimes worked in practice, including the variations in approach across different countries in the socialist world. The Prime Minister had prior exposure to the system in China - his book on the China trip in the 1950s reveals its impact on his thinking - and this was supplemented by short visits to some socialist countries after he became Prime Minister, such as Yugoslavia. Most other members of his cabinet lacked even this exposure. Bangabandhu had a genuine commitment to improving the conditions of the common people of Bangladesh, and his belief in some form of socialism was derived from this fundamental premise. But he had to rely on others to flesh out the details. He delegated this task to the planners, whom he respected for their erudition, commitment, and integrity. However, the commitment of the Prime Minister and his planners was not necessarily matched by that of the regime overall.

The planners needed political guidance to carry out this daunting task. The Prime Minister was too preoccupied with many challenges of leading a country in a turbulent environment. The planners thus expected the Finance and Planning Minister, Tajuddin Ahmed, to step up to the plate. He was not only the Chairman of the Planning Commission in the first year of its existence (later, the Prime Minister himself assumed that position), but was perceived by the planners "to be the torch bearer for the agenda of social transformation which had been incorporated in the 1970 election manifesto of the AL." He was thus expected to play an important role in advising the Commission on how to operationalize the government's professed commitment to socialism. Such a role of the planning minister was vital since that the planners were outsiders in the system, who "now found themselves invested with a political challenge of exceptional complexity for which they had no previous training."

It appears that Tajuddin Ahmed did not quite live up to that expectation. In some of the most candid and revealing pages of this volume, Rehman Sobhan talks about his disappointment at the lack of pro-active guidance from Tajuddin Ahmed on how to navigate the politics of establishing a socialist system. The Deputy Chairman, Professor Nurul Islam, had regular meetings with Tajuddin Ahmed, but usually at his own initiative. Documents sent up to the latter by the Commission often received detailed and insightful feedback, which was indeed valuable. Sobhan writes about the "incisive mind and mature political perspective" of Tajuddin Ahmed, which was very educational for the planners.

However, such feedback usually came only when the planners asked for it. Professor Sobhan's account gives the impression that Tajuddin Ahmed did not proactively convene meetings of the Commission or alert the planners about the goings on at the political level. The political and ideological guidance badly needed by a group of academics, who had suddenly been thrust into important positions in a highly politicized government, was not forthcoming. "As

a result,” Sobhan writes, “the initiative for seeking policy guidelines or political directives rested with the deputy chairman and members.”

Tajuddin Ahmed also appears to have disappointed the planners during cabinet meetings. There was an expectation that since the finance and planning portfolios were both under him, disagreements between the two ministries (including the Planning Commission) would be resolved prior to cabinet meetings. This expectation was often unfulfilled so that “one had the paradoxical situation of two ministries under the same minister engaged in gladiatorial contest before the bemused Cabinet with the minister making an independent intervention not necessarily committed to either side.”

Tajuddin Ahmed may have had a high regard for the planners, but with his sharp political antennas he should have realized that leaving everything to a group of non-political technocrats was a risky proposition in a politically charged environment. Tajuddin Ahmed’s behavior is puzzling given his reputation as a conscientious and meticulous person. Did he believe that the Prime Minister himself was going to guide the Planning Commission and that he should not intervene? Or did he believe that since the Deputy Chairman had been given the rank of a minister, the latter may resent pro-active guidance from a minister and prefer that ministerial advice is provided only when asked for? These questions, potentially of interest to many, are not explored by Rehman Sobhan. Perhaps he felt that this would become a speculative exercise, something that he wanted to avoid.

The authority given to the Planning Commission to coordinate policy across ministries and to vet projects proposed by the ministries did not go down well with the ministries. Both the political and the bureaucratic leadership in the ministries felt this was an encroachment on their jurisdiction. That the planners were outsiders to the system contributed to the feeling that this was a group of arrogant upstarts usurping the turf of others. The planners could have counteracted this by building relationships with the ministers and senior bureaucrats. It appears that the Planning Commission was disinclined to invest in such relationship-building perhaps because its leading members, including Rehman Sobhan, enjoyed close relations with the Prime Minister. Having had the ear of the Prime Minister and convinced that they were on the right side of history, there was a “take it or leave it” attitude, as Rehman Sobhan admits.

This raises some questions that are not answered in the book. Was the Prime Minister comfortable with the planners’ unwillingness to build relations or did he expect them to navigate, on their own, the “murky byways of party politics”? He had introduced a disruption in the system by inducting a group of academics, politically tested but with no prior experience in government, and giving them enormous responsibility, and considerable power and prestige. This is not how things were done in the Pakistan era and was new to the bureaucrats. The granting of such power to a small group of technocrats may have also come as a surprise to the politicians. Did the Prime Minister think through the ramifications of such a disruptive act?

It seems that he may not have done such prior thinking. So, it is useful to analyze how he reacted when all these dynamics - political, administrative, and personal - unfolded. We get some glimpses of this in Rehman Sobhan’s writing. However, Sobhan could have gone deeper into the subject and addressed questions such as the following: did the dynamics surprise (or even shock) Bangabandhu and he did not quite know how to deal with these, or is it that he anticipated these dynamics but, when these materialized, he struggled to address these, partly because he was overwhelmed by many other issues?

It appears that at some point Rehman Sobhan and his colleagues started realizing that their relationship with the Prime Minister was no longer as close as it used to be, or that he was not providing them the level of support they had expected. It appears that, even then, the planners did not change gear and start developing relationships with other players in government. If so, was it on some grounds of principle, or is it that the planning commission leadership was arrogant or egoistic by nature and thus found it difficult to build bridges? Is it that, having spent much of their career till then fighting constant battles with the Pakistani establishment, the planners were locked in a battle-hardened mode? There is not enough self-reflection on these questions by Professor Sobhan.

As mentioned at the outset, paucity of space has precluded a full-scale review of Rehman Sobhan’s enormously rich and insightful book. This review has chosen to focus on one important issue, i.e., the political challenges faced by technocrats who are brought into government from outside, and the critical need for them to build their own relationships within government without the top leadership always batting for them. The planners perhaps enjoyed the power given to them but were unwilling to play the complex game of negotiation, compromise, and maneuvering, which successful execution of power requires. It seems that the balance they sought between the insulation of the technocrat and the power of the politician proved elusive at the end.

Nonetheless, what Rehman Sobhan and his colleagues at the Planning Commission achieved in terms of dealing with the urgent tasks of relief and rehabilitation, establishing the mechanisms of economic management, articulating a long-term vision through the first five-year plan prepared in record time, negotiating aid, and steering the nationalized industries, is a testimony to the dedication, integrity, and hard work of these intrepid economists.