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THE POLITICAL DEMOGRAPHY OF BANGLADESH (U)
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THE POLITICAL DEMOGRAPHY OF BANGLADESH,

10. Myron Weiner

Introduction

1. The answer to the question posed at the recent State Department seminar - what are the political effects of rapid population growth? - is the same as the questions we ask about the political effects of other socio-economic disturbances (such as unemployment, inflation, pollution, etc). It depends. It depends upon how much, what kind, who is effected, how it is perceived, and in what kind of political and economic system it takes place. Americans, for example, have a considerably higher toleration for unemployment than do people in other developed societies: A five to six percent unemployment rate is acceptable in the United States, but not in Britain or France. A Republican administration is likely to view with alarm an increase in unemployment in the aerospace industry, while a Democratic administration is more likely to be alarmed by a rise in unemployment in the ghettos. Similarly, the German electorate is more concerned with inflation than are other industrial societies, a concern (and fear) that effects government monetary policy more sharply than in the United States.

2. In the past decade population growth has emerged as a "problem" for policy makers in a large number of countries.

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It's emergence as a "problem" appears to be independent of a country's rate of population growth. In the United States, for example, population growth is increasingly perceived as a problem at a time when its growth rate is substantially lower than in much of its history and the growth rate appears to be on a downward spiral. In contrast many African countries with twice the U.S. population growth rate do not perceive their growth rate as a problem. Moreover, even when population growth is perceived as a problem, there are a variety of ways in which the problem is defined. The problem may be seen as population impinging upon food (India), or upon non-renewable resources (the U.S.), or as a problem of one ethnic group multiplying more rapidly than another (arabs in Israel, Catholics in Ulster, Bantus in South Africa), or as a problem of crowding (Holland, Belgium). Or the problem may even be defined as too low a rate of population growth (pre-war France).

3. Clearly a country can have a problem even when no one perceives the problem. Many problems are threshold problems, that is, they may be perceived as a problem when they pass a given level (the level varying from one political system to another); pollution, unemployment, crime rates and inflation are typical examples. Though farsighted political leaders, journalists and scholars may perceive that a given rate of unemployment, or pollution will at some future point become a political problem unless new policies are adapted, it is more common for problems to go unrecognized until they have passed some threshold.

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4. While some socio-economic changes are perceived directly as problems, other changes become problems because of their spin-off effects. It is not the rate of population growth itself which may be seen as a problem, but its effects and in most instances population growth is simply one of several variables creating these undesirable effects. Thus, population growth may be a cause of unemployment (in an economy characterized by a slow rate of industrial growth); it may be a cause of malnutrition (in a society with a low rate of agricultural development and maldistribution); it may be a cause of pollution (in an economy geared to a high per capita production of polluting consumer goods); it may be a cause of a high crime rate (when the crime rate is high among young people); and it may be a cause of a housing shortage (in an economy in which the rate of return on housing investment is less than in other investments). Some citizens and political leaders may define the problem as one of unemployment, or malnutrition or pollution, or crime, or a housing shortage without regard for population factors; others may see population growth as the prime cause.

5. The time it takes for the effects of population growth to be felt is one element determining whether people see a cause and effect relationship. Serious shortfalls in food production (and famine) may be seen, in part, as a population problem since each year's population increase immediately necessitates an increase in the country's food requirements. But it is less likely that a government will define unemployment as a population problem

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since the large numbers of people entering the labor force each year are the consequences of decisions made by parents some fifteen to twenty years ago. While a government may launch a family planning program because of the country's food shortages, only an extraordinarily farsighted elite would think of a family planning program as means of dealing with an anticipated unemployment problem in the 1980s and 90s.

6. For the analyst there are two separable analytical tasks. The first is to see how and to what extent participants in the political system perceive population factors (e.g. population density, distribution, composition, rates of growth) as "problems"; and secondly, to extract the demographic component of existing and emerging problems. Whether or not these components are perceived as causes of problems by participants in the political system.

THE POPULATION "PROBLEM" OF BANGLADESH

7. It is widely assumed by many observers that demographic factors have played a role in the disasters that have befallen Bangladesh in the past two years. Whether these disasters have been nature-made or man-made, their magnitude is related to the country's high population density. The cyclone of 1970 hit a low-lying cyclone prone densely populated region along the Bay of Bengal. Had the area been less densely populated and had the disaster, therefore, been smaller, the capacity (and therefore, perhaps, the willingness) of the Pakistan government to take effective relief measures would have been greater. And had the crisis been less severe and the government's response more positive, would the Bengalis have

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been so united in their support of the Awami League in the election of December 1970? Moreover, if the population of Bangladesh had been substantially smaller (not 75 million, but closer to the 40 million which Bangladesh had in 1951), how much smaller would the flow of refugees across the border to India have been? And if the refugee flow had been substantially smaller (and the burden to India correspondingly smaller) would the Indian government have acted militarily?

8. Throughout the political crisis between the two wings of Pakistan, population numbers played an important role. That Bengalis always outnumbered non-Bengalis in the Pakistani political system was, from the very beginning of the new state of Pakistan, a factor inhibiting the acceptance of a democratic parliamentary framework on the part of West Pakistanis. The persistence of a large Hindu population in East Pakistan (while in the west most of the Hindus migrated to India) was perceived by many West Pakistanis as evidence of East Bengal's lack of commitment to the concept of a truly Islamic state. And the migration of Urdu-speaking Biharis into East Bengal was perceived by some Bengalis as the incursion of a potential fifth column hostile to Bengali claims upon the central government. And finally, it is relevant to ask how the high population growth rate of East Bengal after 1947, combined with the absence of migratory opportunities as had earlier in the century when East Bengalis freely migrated to Bihar, West Bengal and Assam contributed to the economic and political malaise of the region.

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10. A more systematic and analytical assessment of the demographic dimensions of Bangladesh politics would entail the following:

I. Demographic features

- a. Population dynamics: fertility, mortality, migration and their effects upon (a) population growth and (b) age distribution.
- b. Population distribution: population densities in various regions of Bangladesh, rural-urban population flows, rural-to-rural movements; the dimensions of outmigration prior to and after 1947.
- c. Ethnic demography; size, composition, distribution and rates of change among various religions and linguistic groups.

II. Population change and political dynamics

- a. The impact of population growth on the distribution of political power: the political effects of increasing urbanization of Bengali Muslims; the political role of an emerging class of educated youth; the political effects of a changing Muslim-Hindu distribution; the political role of Bihari migrants and other non-Bengali populations
- b. The impact of population growth on political demands and political-administrative capabilities; increasing demands for social services, e.g. health, education, transport, welfare, etc. To what extent has politicization outrun governmental resources and administrative capabilities?
- c. The impact of population growth on the political economy: the effects of population growth on income distribution; its impact on land ownership and land use and their impact in turn upon programs to increase agricultural productivity; the relationship between food production and population growth; the impact of population growth on unemployment within different social classes with different degrees of politicization. (how great, for example, have been the pressures for increasingly middle class employment by expanding the bureaucracy?)

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- d. The impact of population growth on generational cleavages. Are there division between political socialization experiences and therefore divergent political outlooks? To what extent are the cleavages in Bengali politics - between the Awami League and former Mukti Bahini workers, and between the moderate centrists and the radical left - generational cleavages?

III. Population change and political perceptions of the "Problem"

- a. How salient are population issues? Among economic planners? Within other parts of the government? Within the Awami League? Among other political forces? Where does population policy rank in a list of priority concerns?
- b. Is population seen in an ethnic-political frame of reference (i.e. the relationship between Bengalis and Pakistanis, East Bengalis and West Bengalis and West Bengalis, Hindus and Muslims, Bengalis and Biharis, etc.) or in an economic frame of reference (population growth as it relates to food-protein requirements and to employment)?

IV. Political demographic Prospects

- a. Where are some of the likely ways in which population factors may impinge on the political development of Bangladesh within the next decade?
- b. What are the prospects in Bangladesh for a concerted governmental effort to accelerate the demographic transition through a population policy and to take measures to cope with some of the effects of population growth?