Bangladesh and the BKF, an overview: history, political situation, peasant struggles…

*This interview by Pierre Rousset (of Europe Solidarity without Borders ESSF) with **Badrul Alam**, president of the Bangladesh Krishok Federation (BKF), was conducted shortly before the parliamentary elections on January 7, 2024. The ballot predictably ended in victory for the Awami League, which won a large majority in the face of a boycott by the main opposition parties. However, the League was unable to secure a high turnout, which stood at around 40% of voters. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina won a fifth term of office, her fourth consecutive since 2008. The opposition denounced the election as a "sham", with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party going so far as to accuse the government of ballot-box stuffing.*

Pierre Rousset – Could you present Bangladesh, the country, for readers who know little about it?

Badrul Alam – Bangladesh achieved its national independence in 1971 through an all-out people's war against the Pakistani army and its collaborators in Bangladesh. 3 million people sacrificed their lives and 200,000 (two hundred thousand) women (mostly mothers and sisters) lost their chastity.

Formerly, Bangladesh was part of India during the British rule. British occupied undivided Bengal in the mid-18th century and continued occupying the entire India gradually. Concretely, the then British East India Company (EIC) took over power in 1757, killing Siraj ud-Doulah who was the Nawab of Bangal (Governor of a particular region: Bangla-Bihar-Odisa). It pillaged Bengal, destroyed the economic resources of the rural population. Famine became widespread between 1769

and 1773, causing the deaths of maybe up to 10 million people. Soon, Britain became the virtual ruler of Bangla-Bihar-Odisa. In 1857, widespread unrest led to a mass uprising against the EIC's rule and the authority of the British Crown. In 1857-1858, one hundred years later, Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India. The struggles for independence in the subcontinent were crushed in bloodshed. Queen Victoria established its direct colony and ruled for 190 years (including the company's 100 years' rules). In 1947, at the end of the WWII, the British handed over the power to native political entity dividing India into two countries ¬– India and Pakistan.

East Bangla became part of Pakistan with the new name of East Pakistan – as a province of Pakistan, even if the two parts of the newly formed Pakistan State were separated by some 1700 kilometres, had a different history and did not speak the same language. British empire divided India on the basis of religion. They handed Pakistan to Muslim leaders and India to Hindus leaders. In this way, the greater Bengal or Bangla was split, its eastern part being included in Pakistan. After partition, West Pakistan started off with imposing a colonial style of rule on the eastern part. In every step they began to neglect Bengali people living in East Pakistan or East Bengal.

In order to strengthen their power and rule, they hatched a conspiracy against Bengali offering Urdu as one and only sate language in the whole of Pakistan in 1948, just 8 months after the partition. Bengali people did not welcome their proposal; rather they strongly resisted any step in this regard. As a result, there was a blood shedding incident taking place in Bangladesh that claims several people's lives because of the shooting of Pakistani law and order forces in 1952. It was called "language moment".

In the following course of events, Bengali people built the hope of independence in their heart, resulting in many movements and struggles. They were people's uprising in 1969,

when the Iron Man Field Marshal Ayub Khan, then President of Pakistan, was forced to quit power. Moreover, in a national election in 1970, Bangladesh bagged majority seats with a landslide victory but, unfortunately, the power was not handed over to the elected representatives. In the course of time, in 1971 Bangladesh declared the independence of the country, rejecting Pakistan. Consequently, Pakistan invaded Bangladesh on 26 March 1971 in the name of Operation Search Light. Actually, they brutally committed genocide on Bengali people. The Bengali people did not sit idle, they started guerrilla fight against the well-equipped army of Pakistan. Through a nine-month tough struggle Pakistani army were defeated, and forced to surrender and leave the country on 16 December 1971. On 3 December 1971, the Indian army had joined their forces with the freedom fighter to accelerate the victory. Bangladesh gained a place as a new independent country in the world map.

Now Bangladesh has completed 53 years of its independence. It is still a low-income group country, with the identity of poor economic performance, although there is a propaganda campaign, from the ruling class, according to which Bangladesh is getting up and will be developed country by 2041.

Bangladesh has big potential agricultural sector, which claims great nursing/attention for it actual development, but this sector is always neglected and the people who are engaged within this sector (peasants) are also neglected. Poverty, pauperization, marginalization, malnutrition and exclusion are common phenomenon in the rural agricultural area. Basically, the development of the country is rested on how importance is laid on agriculture.

Whereas all ruling governments since the independence laid emphasis on the structural development of the country, which always brings sufferings to the lives and livelihood of the ordinary people.

Geography: Located in South Asia, to the north of the Gulf of Bangalore, it is virtually landlocked within India, sharing a small border with Burma. Most of the country is taken up by the Ganges delta, a fertile plain, but very flat and prone to tropical cyclones, floods and monsoons, and threatened by rising sea levels due to global warming.

Demographics: With a surface area of 147,570 km2 and a population of 170 million, it is one of the most densely populated countries in the world (1,286 inhabitants/km2).

Language: Bengali

Independence: 1971

Capital: Dhaka

Geography of Bangladesh – Wikipedia. en.wikipedia.org

Let's start with the evolution of the situation in Bangladesh…

The bourgeoisie election campaign is going on. This election is going to be controversial, as before, as the major opposition parties will not join the election. It will be a monolithic election, somehow. The opposition is still in the street, demanding that the elections be under the responsibility of a caretaker government. More than 5000 people have been put in jail by the government, calling them obstacles to the elections. The ruling party will hold the

election at any cost.

The election commission called off all political activities until election is over. We have 2 or 3 activities during this period. We are wondering how to perform those.

Last year, Bangladesh experienced a major political crisis. The situation of the ruling party was very precarious. The onslaught of monetary and price inflation made life miserable for the population. The price of basic necessities soared. People couldn’t eat the food they needed and wanted. The poor, the lower-middle class and the middle class were forced to cut their family expenses drastically. Since the start of COVID 19 in 2020, ordinary people’s incomes have fallen, and this is still the case today. The number of poor people has risen alarmingly. However, the government claims that a person’s average income per year is US$2,800, which is not true. It makes propaganda about its structural development projects, such as building bridges, subways and elevated expressways, but it doesn’t think about people’s concrete lives, their suffering, their problems of life and death.

Health crisis is still with us. The dengue and cold situation have become an issue of concern in the country. About 2000 people died in 2023 already. Every day people are dying of dengue.

Bangladesh Krishok Federation Kurigram District Unit General Secretary Mokaddes Hossain gave away warm cloth to poor people

Last year, the social situation was not very good either. There were numerous cases of child abuse, repression of women, murder and enforced disappearance throughout the country.

Many emigrant workers returned home from Middle Eastern countries, and many emigrant women returned with empty pockets, as they were unable to tolerate the sexual torture inflicted on them by male family members there. Women work mainly as domestic servants in the Middle East.

How would you characterize the present political regime?

Last two terms, it came to power by electoral manoeuvring and engineering. They are also going to hold a same type of election this year, with no participation of major opposition groups. The regime is already branded as a fascist-like one by many. With this election it will not get rid of this brand. Rather it will be possible to call it fascists in a way people have not ever seen before.

Presently, the party in power is called the Bangladesh Awami League. It led the country's liberation war in 1971. Sheikh Hasina is the Prime Minister, with executive power. She is the daughter of the veteran leader Bango Bandhu (title given by the people before the independence of the country) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was the key leader of the Awami League during and after the independence struggle.

In effect, after the independence, Sheik Muzibur Rahaman wanted to concentrate all power in his hand, forming a new party which was to be the only party, banning all other political parties in the country. The regime also banned all dailies except for four newspapers.

This one-party system rule and the killing of freedom of expression were not accepted by the then standing forces, religious groups and some leftist groups as well. Consequently, conspiracy started at national and international level that resulted in the pathetic history of Muzib's family. He was killed with his family members, except for his daughters, Sheik Hasina and Sheik Rehana.

On top of that, twice, martial law was declared. One was declared in 1976 by General Ziaur Rahman, who as the husband of the opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia, and another by General Ershad in 1982. Since 1991, a bourgeois democratic system became more functional, with all its weakness, after the collapse of Ershad regime. Till to date, bourgeoisie governance with a parliamentary system is in effect with general elections. Therefore, in short, it can be said that the characteristic of the government in Bangladesh is bourgeois till now.

What has been the social responses to the crisis?

The last couple of years, several movements were built to control the prices of basic necessities, but nothing changed. The main bourgeois opposition tried to overthrow the current

government, but failed. In order to oust the government, they resorted to various actions. All their efforts went in vain. Different people's organizations and social movements also raised their voice, especially against price increases.

The government is always suppressing people's movement. Most of the time, it takes stern measures against protesters. Arrest, torture, confinement, false case are the tools of the government to suppress the movements. Forced disappearance of opposition has also become part of its political culture.

Despite receiving a huge financial stimulation from the government, the biggest industrial sector, the garment one, has become vulnerable due to COVID 19 and different adverse measures taken by the importing countries. As a result, there is an unstable situation in the garment industries around the question of increase in salary of the workers, who are mostly women. The garment workers would get paid with 8300/- as a monthly salary. They claimed 23000/- in view of price inflation, increase in living standard, etc. In face of such a strong movement, the government was compelled to concede the demands, but it approved only a 12500/- monthly wage. The representatives of garments' organisation got frustrated by the government decision, but accepted it for the time being. However, many garments organisation rejected the decisions, telling it unrealistic. Whatever, the government decision came into effect.

The money laundering has become a big issue in the country. Quite a number of people who are rich and super rich siphoned off incredible amount of money to different countries using so called tax haven countries. They built luxurious houses and other establishments in Canada, Malaysia, UAE (United Arab Emirate), and so on. The last couple of years people have raised their voice very strongly, demanding to stop illicit capital flight, which is against the people's interest.

After every national election, there are attacks against the

minority groups in Bangladesh. The miscreants and criminals set fire to, and vandalize the houses and properties of the minority. They torture, injure and kill minority people. Sometimes, they create such a situation of panic that minority people are forced to leave their homestead and land property. It took place hundreds of times since independence in 1971. However, the minority people never got justice.

What is the state of the Left?

The left-wing Marxist-Leninist forces [which in Bangladesh means non-Maoist] have remained poorly organized. They have come together in different platforms with different strategies. Some Marxist-Leninist-Maoist parties are still part of the ruling party alliance. There are some groups of leftists who are trying to get organized with the commitment of people's uprising but they are very weak in happening that.

The Trotskyist party has organized various street actions against the corruption of bureaucrats and business leaders.

It is true that it there is an ebb tide in the left movement in the country, but the positive side, a source of optimism, is that they still exist in a country where religious fundamentalism is always active to destabilize left forces. According to fundamentalists Left people are Kafer (anti-religion). They should not have a right to living in a Muslim country like Bangladesh. They might feel happy if they could kill the leftist people. They target not only the political left, but also the progressive intellectuals.

Leftist political parties and groups are financially very poor in Bangladesh. This is because of the fact that they cannot raise funding from the public owing to the Anti-extortionist Act, which is being used by the government randomly. Moreover, the poor people are the main force of the leftist people and they have lost their capacity to give dues to the party, although they have still real support to give.

Some leftist people left politics for their very survival and joined different NGOs. Some were engaged in business, though it is very challenging for them as a political activist. Some left politics for ever from the ground frustration. Now they have a very negative attitude to the left politics and socialism as well as communism.

By the way, in spite of all impediments it can be pointed out that the left politics are still alive and bit by bit it is trying to make space in the national politic to become mainstream.

Could you present your organisation, the Bangladesh Krishok Federation

The Bangladesh Krishok Federation (BKF, Bangladesh Peasant Federation), as a grassroots organisation, has a long history of working on behalf of the peasantry in Bangladesh. Although its main focus is on land-related issues, it also gives importance to many other issues such as the environment, ecology, agriculture/agroecology, food sovereignty, climate change, land reform, genetically modified organisms, the commons, tax justice, water, water bodies and gender, etc.

When it was founded in 1976, the Bangladesh Krishok Federation began its activities by raising just one very concrete issue: that of the land that should be distributed to landless peasants and smallholders who were suffering a subhuman lifestyle in our society. Right from the start, this issue gained momentum, supported by local chapters. The BKF then focused on land which is mainly Khaschar (small islands without owners surrounded by water which emerged from the river bed) and which is not subject to any particular property rights. In principle, the land belongs to the government. The BKF mobilized the landless, agricultural workers and peasants to raise their voices to assert their right to land, drawing the attention of all the other organizations working on the same issue, in order to strengthen the movement.

Although these Khaschars were left uncultivated, they were not left unattended. Local influential groups and henchmen wanted to keep these lands illegally. That's why the idea was to dislodge them through a movement, a mass mobilization. In early 1992, this movement met with real success, thanks to a vast occupation of land by the landless. Previously, in 1980, huge tracts of land had been occupied, but there had been a setback. The landless were unable to keep the land, as the then government declared the occupation illegal. The main leaders of the BKF were then arrested and imprisoned. Subsequently, the BKF carried out an assessment of the movement's setback. Two findings came up as a problem: 1. The lack of legal documents in the interest of the landless; 2. The low participation of women in the movement.

During the 1992 movement, these two conditions were fully met. That is why the occupation was maintained. Nothing could dislodge the landless peasants from their possession of the land. Of course, there were battles between the landless peasants and influential local interest groups. There have been many victims and bogus court cases against landless peasant leaders. However, all the cases were dealt with effectively and efficiently in the lower and higher courts by the organisation. Based on this success, further land occupations have taken place in many other parts of the country. To date, 76600 acres of Khasland have been distributed to over 100,000 landless people across the country. Among them are 22 small islands in the south of the country, 9 shrimp-growing centers in the southwest and 12.5 kilometres long abandoned Khasland on the railroad built by the British regime in northern Bangladesh.

In 2022, we faced a major challenge, namely the occupation and colonization of new Khasland lands. A small area of Khasland close to an existing occupied island was taken over by the landless and the land was distributed among 41 new landless families. These families have become dignified owners of a

plot of land that guarantees them food sovereignty. They were able to build their homes, cultivate the land and raise cows, buffalo and poultry. Around the issue of land and food sovereignty, we ran 13 mobilization, training and national consultation campaigns. Through these programs, we have raised awareness among peasants and landless people of the legal aspects of action and the right of landless peasants to the government's Khasland.

We have linked the issue of food sovereignty to that of the land movement, because they are complementary. No food sovereignty can be guaranteed without land. And the central concept of food sovereignty [superior to that of food security] is in fact the right of peasants to land. We first came into contact with the concept of food sovereignty in 1996, at the World Food Summit in Rome, Italy. Since then, we've been developing the idea from a Bangladeshi perspective. We were also the first to promote and disseminate the idea in Bangladesh. We have also repeatedly pushed the government to incorporate food sovereignty as a principle in national agricultural policy, even though it has opted for the traditional concept of food security.

As part of this campaign, we endeavoured to convince peasants to use local seeds on their arable land, to grow culturally accepted foods and food for human consumption, and not to cede their lands to land grabbers. The farmers were able to understand the importance of food sovereignty. The people who joined the program also remembered the great caravan campaigns of 2011 and 2014, in which food sovereignty was one of the main themes. So, our sustained campaign on food sovereignty has at least succeeded in popularizing the issue. People can understand what food sovereignty is. Previously, they only knew the concept of food security, which is a major international program. Under this campaign, the international communities have not been able to eradicate hunger and poverty in the world, which is the main objective of the food security

concept. Rather, it is the implementation of food sovereignty through mobilizations that could optimally eliminate hunger and poverty in rural areas.

Seminar on 'What is the relationship between land movement and food sovereignty?', October 15, 2022 organized by Bangladesh Krishok Federation

We have also set up various agitation programs on agroecology, the environment, ecology and climate change. Our country has a Ministry of the Environment, Forestry and Climate Change. So, the state is concerned about climate, the environment and forests. It is not concerned with agroecology and ecology. Agroecology is a very recent concept promoted by the FAO and the UN. Agroecology enables people to obtain food that is healthy, nutritious and free from toxicity. It is a simple and scientific agricultural method. It is not a one-way approach; rather a diversified one with a holistic approach. There are many agro-ecological practices in different parts of the world. These are practices that respect the environment and ecology, and help combat climate change.

Bangladesh is an agricultural country. Its agriculture began converting to chemical farming in the mid-sixties under the name of the "green revolution". This method initially led to a considerable increase in production, but we gradually lost the fertility of our soils, our plantations, our greenery, our

fish, our health, our environment, our ecology and the micro-organisms present in the soil. To save the whole agriculture, which is our culture and heritage, we need to adopt agroecology.

Bangladesh is a front-line victim of global climate change. Consequently, the rich industrialized countries of the North, which have been emitting carbon for 250 years since the Industrial Revolution, owe an ecological and historical debt to countries like Bangladesh, which are vulnerable to climate change. We shifted the focus of our ongoing campaign on climate change last year, concentrating on this issue of reparation. The issue of ecology and environment is also included. The campaign was conducted in 13 points of the country's 64 districts. During our campaign, we demanded reparations from the countries responsible for climate change resulting from greenhouse gas emissions. We also demanded compensation for the losses and damage suffered by the countries affected. We demanded legal protection within the framework of the United Nations for migrants forced to emigrate by the climate crisis.

Bangladesh is a country where the available land is small relative to its population. The current population is 170 million. To feed this large population, well-organized land management is essential. What is needed, therefore, is a comprehensive and genuine land and agrarian reform that would give landless peasants the right to cultivate the fields as first choice. This reform would be distributive and redistributive in nature. The State's initiative will be indispensable for this. We have been campaigning for real reform for a long time. The idea of agrarian reform is not new. It appeared officially after the independence of India and Pakistan from British rule in 1947, but never materialized. It has always remained on paper. Even at the time of the creation of Bangladesh [formerly East Pakistan], after the war of independence in 1971, there was no progress

on reform issues, although they were discussed on several occasions. There is also a controversial land ownership system. Last year, we prioritized this issue as part of our movement and campaign.

Like land, water and water bodies are our source of sustenance. Unfortunately, water and water bodies are being monopolized by national and international transnational corporations. This happens in the name of purchasing, housing, urbanization, export processing zones, industrialization, eco-parks and so on. Most of the time, this happens in areas populated predominantly by indigenous people [Adivasi], who are evicted from their homes. Our partner organisation, Bangladesh Adivasi Samity, remains very active against illegal encroachment on indigenous customary land ownership. It also fights against illegal logging and proliferation by the Forest Department. Together, we are fighting against land, water and lake grabbers. In 2022, we set up a program to protect our common property rights which were gradually being privatized. The government's privatization policy, prescribed by the World Bank and IMF, is at the root cause of this phenomenon.

Last year, we focused a lot on the issue of tax justice. We have raised this issue both nationally and internationally. Basically, we have a very regressive tax system from which our population suffers greatly. The universal VAT (value-added tax) hits the poor hardest. It's an indirect tax imposed on the population. In addition, the income and corporate tax system is also inequitable. Large corporations benefit from tax exemptions, tax cuts and so on. They also evade taxes and send money to other countries via tax havens. They also embezzle money through over- and under-invoicing. In addition, some of the super-rich have smuggled billions of BDT [the national currency] from Bangladesh to various countries to settle their families. The government should bring this money back home and use it for the cause of the poor. To rationalize the tax system, the administration must propose a progressive

taxation system. That’s why, last year, we worked hard on tax justice. We organized human chains, rallies, demonstrations with flags, festoons, banners, placards, etc. at national level.

The Bangladesh Krishok Federation has a broad mass base nationwide, 30% of whom are women. We’re trying to increase this number to 50%. The LGBTQI issue is very sensitive in our country, which is primarily Muslim. We organize seminars/workshops on this issue, but we don’t try to identify them, as this is not accepted by society and could put them in danger. However, transgender people are automatically exposed and they are the poorest of the poor in society. They can join our organisation openly. Our main gender issue is to establish women’s rights in society. We have a long history of women’s movement in Bangladesh, based on the 14 points of demands raised by our sister organisation called Bangladesh Kishani Sabha (BKS), which is an organisation made up of 100% peasant women. In addition, our organisation is especially involved in the land occupation movement to establish women’s right to land. The gender issue was seriously explained and highlighted in the 2022 campaign.

In 2022, we carried out numerous humanitarian actions. There were deaths and serious injuries on an island occupied by our organisation. The peasant leader Bakul Begum was killed and her sister Mukul Begum is still alive, but seriously injured. She had to stay in hospital for over three months. Being unable to move about, she required considerable medical support. Complaints have been lodged with the police station. These cases are still pending.

Leaders of Civil Society in the press conference protesting the killing of Bakul Begum on 6 December 2022

Bakul Begum

Another executive member had to undergo brain surgery. She also received partial support. A patient suffering from a serious kidney disease whose kidney was transplanted was also supported on several occasions by our organisation as a senior member.

In 2022 and 2023, we provided humanitarian aid to those affected by the climate disaster, and also helped those affected by Cyclone and Corona to recover.

In addition, we organized numerous regular programs, such as various celebrations of national and international days.

Source: ***Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières (ESSF)***

Main Picture: October 30, 2023, at 12 noon in the organization of North Char Shahjalal landless families in Dashmina Upazila of Patuakhali district, with the cooperation of Bangladesh Krishok Federation and Bangladesh Kishani Sabha