

Bangladesh and China

[This is a question from a friend inspired by some old articles from Peking Review about Bangladesh, together with my response on Oct. 21, 2008. –S.H.]

----- Original message -----

- > So...I'm actually starting to read the PRs you are posting (great job
- > BTW!). I'm curious. I understand (although completely disagree) why the
- > PRC supported Pakistan in the Pakistan/India/Bangladesh war. But how
- > does it square with the Leninist belief in a nations rights to
- > self-determination...*especially* as Bangladesh was not, ever, part of
- > any "Pakistani Nation" but was set up for [as] part of sectarian
- > religious political dogma that trampled on Bangladeshi national rights?
- > I mean, did Maoists outside of China ever disagree with China on this?
- >
- > D.W.

[Scott's response:]

Hi D...,

I'm not particularly knowledgeable on this Pakistan/Bangladesh issue. But the way I myself look at it is that there are a great number of specific political principles we Marxists need to generally support including:

- 1) The right of nations to self-determination and independence, and
- 2) The right of countries not to be attacked by foreign powers and to be dismembered by them for their own imperialistic reasons.

In the case of Pakistan/Bangladesh after India sent its troops into "East Pakistan" there was a serious conflict between these two particular principles, and so we had to choose. I think that in the short term China correctly chose to emphasize principle #2. In the longer term they (and the whole world) had to recognize that Bangladesh had achieved independence which then had to be supported.

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Behind the sort of thinking that I've outlined here is a rejection of Kantianism in politics (and morality!). We have one overriding M-L political/ethical principle: Whatever is in the real common, collective interests of the people of the world is good and right. And one primary corollary to that principle:

Whatever advances the social revolution and helps to bring about communism throughout the whole world is good and right. (This is a corollary to the basic political/ethical principle because of the simple fact that only through social revolution and the advance to communism can the actual long-term interests of the people of the world be satisfied.)

Principles like the ones I labeled “1)” and “2)” above, while important, are not absolute. Kant thought that (in ethics at least) principles like “Lying is wrong” or “Stealing is wrong” *are* absolutes. But one of the many problems with this Kantian approach is that sometimes moral and political maxims conflict with each other! (Or worse, they can sometimes conflict with our primary political/ethical principle.) In those cases we have to choose to support one and not the other. Another general problem with specific moral or political maxims is that it is usually fairly easy to find special cases where they are *not* valid (whether or not they conflict with other specific maxims). Thus it is easy to think of situations where it is not only not wrong to lie, but where it would actually be quite wrong *not* to lie! (To save an innocent person’s life for example.)

So, in short, the principle which we should and *do* generally uphold, that nations have the right to self-determination and independence, is *not* an absolute which we are bound to uphold under any and all circumstances.

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As far as I know, Maoists outside of China (except for some in India and in Bangladesh itself) *did* support the Chinese position. It was very wrong for (some) Maoists in India to reject the Chinese position, but it *may* well have been appropriate and correct for the Maoists *in Bangladesh* to have a different position! More anti-Kantianism! What is right to do for people in different circumstances is not always the same!

Probably the support for the Chinese position by most Maoists around the world was partly not for the sorts of good reasons (in my view!) that I mentioned above, but rather just because they were primed to approve of pretty much whatever China did. (In the real world, alas, many political people tend to be somewhat unthinking followers of the leaders of their own trends!)

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I’ve had to briefly interrupt my postings of PR articles in order to post a few of my own old articles and email discussions relevant to the current election. (I personally find the election issue settled and tiresome, but others do not!) But I expect to get back to PR posting soon!

Scott