

# Shah AMS Kibria: A son's tribute

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DR. REZA KIBRIA

ALTHOUGH it has been a year since the assassination of my father Shah AMS Kibria, MP, in a grenade attack in his constituency in northeastern Bangladesh, it is still difficult for me to fully come to grips with losing him. Walking past his study in our Dhanmondi home I half-expect him to be sitting at his computer and to turn smilingly towards me to ask my opinion on some article he was working on. I console myself with thinking that he led a full and very productive life, but the regret is that he had so much more to give, even at the age of 73. In the last year of his life he wrote over one hundred articles. He managed to do this in the midst of his duties as editor of a weekly magazine and as an active Member of Parliament, while always finding time for members of our extended family (a particular favourite being his beloved nephew Shah Manzur Huda, killed with him that day) and friends, and giving companionship to the person he was closest to, my mother, his wife of over fifty years.

My father's academic record was legendary. After securing first place in the whole of the then East Pakistan in the IA examinations (equivalent to the HSC), he stood First Class First in economics in both his BA and MA examinations at Dhaka University. He then stood first in the Central Superior Services (CSS) examination and joined the Pakistan Foreign Service in 1954. Incidentally, the person who came second in that year's CSS examination was one of the few Pakistanis to obtain a First Class at Oxford University.

His professional career was no less spectacular. He quit the Pakistan Embassy in Washington during the Liberation War of 1971 to work for Bangladesh, and returned to Dhaka in January 1972 to begin the task of creating the Foreign Ministry of the new republic. He had especially fond memories of this period in his career, as it gave him the chance to work closely with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, whom he revered. In March 1972, at the age of 41 he was appointed Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was appointed High Commissioner to Australia in 1978.

Within our family everyone always marveled at the good fortune that seemed to follow him and the apparent ease with which obstacles and adversity were transformed into opportunities. I prefer to believe that this had more to do with his ability to focus his enormous talents on whatever task he was confronted with. One of his diplomatic service friends from South America, who had seen him excel in different international settings from the 1960's onwards, was pleased and not all that surprised to find him representing Bangladesh as Finance Minister in the late 1990s, remarking, "Kibria, wherever you go you rise to the top!" There are many examples of apparent setbacks in his career that turned out to be blessings in disguise, but I will recount just two of them here.

The assassination of Bangabandhu in 1975 allowed the return of the defeated forces of 1971. The collaborators of the Pakistani occupation forces were rehabilitated in the government, and they targeted those who had distinguished themselves in the Liberation War. The Foreign Ministry was no exception. My father had already attained ambassadorial rank and could not be demoted below such status. He could normally expect a mid-level ambassadorship for his next posting, but those in charge of the Foreign Ministry decided to send him to one of the two places in the world where he would hold the rank of ambassador but would not technically be described as one -- Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations agencies in Geneva, Switzerland. This position was regarded as a down-gradation by the vindictive but not particularly farsighted people in control of the Ministry. In Geneva my father became an influential figure among the Permanent Representatives, through the sheer force of character and ability. He was soon elected Chairman of the Group of 77 (the major grouping of developing nations) and played a prominent role in many of the international negotiations taking place in Geneva. He became well-known in UN circles around that time as one of the more articulate spokesmen of the developing countries.

From Geneva he returned to Dhaka as Foreign Secretary in 1978. In that capacity he drafted the initial concept paper for SAARC, drawing upon his experiences in Tehran (as one of the founding directors of RCD, an agency for regional cooperation between Iran, Turkey and Pakistan) and Geneva, where he observed at first hand the effectiveness of regional groupings. As Foreign Secretary, he defended the interests of Bangladesh with tenacity and skill.

Following a number of disagreements with the President (General Ziaur Rahman), notably regarding the induction of Bangabandhu's killers into the diplomatic service,

my father was out of favour by 1980. In February 1981 Kurt Waldheim, the Secretary General of the United Nations, made a trip to Bangladesh during which he was to meet the country's candidate for the post of Executive Secretary of ESCAP, a very senior civil servant. The Secretary General also met my father, with whom he was deeply impressed. Mr. Waldheim returned to New York and informed the Bangladesh Government that he was prepared to appoint my father to the post, but not the Government's chosen candidate. This infuriated President Zia, who initially refused to even respond to this message, however, he was finally persuaded to relent and release my father to take up this assignment through the intercession of various well-wishers. My father became Executive Secretary of ESCAP with the rank of Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations on May 1, 1981, and served in that capacity with great distinction until 1992, when he left Bangkok to return to his homeland.

Upon his return to Dhaka my father's first task was to remodel and refurbish "Malancha," the house in Dhanmondi where he lived until his death (even while he was Minister). With the assistance of a talented architect who had recently returned from England, alterations were made to make the house more comfortable. One notable addition was the study/artist's studio he shared with my mother (a noted artist), a room overlooking the garden with windows on three sides. It was the room where the two of them would spend many hours each day, working less than a meter apart.

He quickly became quite well-known as a columnist for several Dhaka newspapers, writing in both Bengali (at his desk, by hand) and English (on the computer). I believe his writings will be regarded as models of clarity and style for many years to come. He had that rare gift of being able to express complex ideas in simple language. At this time he also formally joined the Awami League, which had then been in opposition for almost two decades. He served first as a member of the AL Advisory Council and later as Political Advisor to Sheikh Hasina, then Leader of the Opposition. My father played an important part in the planning and management of the campaign for the 1996 elections. It was a matter of great satisfaction to him that he played a role in restoring to office the party of Bangabandhu, led by his daughter, against tremendous

odds and despite many conspiracies aimed at thwarting the will of the people. In the truest sense, to him this represented a pledge redeemed.

My father felt it was a great honour to be chosen by Sheikh Hasina to be Finance Minister in the 1996-2001 Awami League Government. The period was marked by many innovative policies -- such as the introduction of old age and widows' pensions, a major expansion of small-scale agricultural credit, low-cost-housing schemes and youth employment programmes -- and important reforms in the banking and financial sectors. He believed strongly in the educational value of computers and the internet, as well as the growth and employment potential of Information Technology, and this was reflected in his initiative to remove all import duties on computers. The impact of the banking sector reforms he implemented was manifested in the banking sector's sustained surge in profitability. Under his stewardship the economy experienced fast growth (led by agriculture) with a remarkable degree of price stability.

The countercyclical policies he undertook to deal with the impact of the 1998 floods were successful in averting an economic downturn. The bold policies introduced to deal with the hardship imposed on the rural poor by the floods (free rice was provided by the Government to 4.25 million of the poorest households for nine months) caused strains on internal and external balances but were always deemed by him to be worthwhile in terms of ensuring that people would not die of hunger. I remember his once telling me that the measure of success of a Finance Minister of Bangladesh should be for the poorest of the poor to be able to say that their condition had improved during his tenure.

Although victorious in the race for his own parliamentary seat (which was actually next to the Nabiganj constituency that contained our ancestral home) the failure of the Awami League to win a second term was a great disappointment. My father was deeply alarmed by the vindictiveness and ruthlessness of the BNP-Jamaat-Islami coalition and the attacks on minorities and liberal intellectuals in the wake of the elections. He became the founder-editor of a Bengali weekly magazine (Mridubhasan -- "Softly Spoken") which became the vehicle for liberal writers and intellectuals of note. He continued to be a member of the

Advisory Council of the Awami League, and was active in the affairs of his constituency but was devoting more time to writing at the time of his death.

The fact that my father had an intellect of the first-rank is widely known, but I find that except for those who knew him well, the quality of mind that he represented is less well-understood. When I was young it was not easy to come to an appreciation of his abilities -- it is difficult to be awed by someone you see at breakfast every morning -- but even then my sister Nazli and I realised that our father's knowledge and analytical skills were considerable. It was when I went up to Oxford and had the opportunity to study under the guidance of some of the finest minds in the world that I realised that my father's intellect was actually something quite out of the ordinary. He had an ability that I have seen in only the very brightest of individuals, to quickly grasp the most complex of issues at first reading and then to make insightful comments that seemed to represent long and detailed study. Looking over a long and complicated report he could readily identify the most important issues and not be distracted by subsidiary matters.

Despite being so gifted, he never took things for granted and was hard working by nature, beginning his days at dawn and continuing until late into the evening. Even into his seventies he could put in more hours of sustained intellectual effort than most individuals half his age. He was a voracious reader, and would not take long to read and absorb any new books or articles that he came across or were recommended to him. The depth and breadth of his knowledge never ceased to startle me -- whether it was the influence of the French Impressionists on modern art, the administrative system of the Ottoman Empire or theories of exchange rate dynamics, he always seemed to have the essence of things at his fingertips. He loved the poetry and songs of Rabindranath Tagore, a passion he shared with my mother, who at one point had about 550 Tagore songs in her repertoire. He could quote readily from his favourite books of poems, and in his speeches and conversations, he always demonstrated a telling turn of phrase.

He was warm and affectionate with those whom he liked and trusted but was also courteous and kind to all those who approached him. He could be very firm on some matters, but had a forgiving nature. There were those who took advantage of this and wrongly believed that the absence of a rebuke meant that he had either been deceived or was unaware. He was quite fearless, except for the one thing that he had nightmares about -- the possibility that my mother, afflicted by numerous ailments, would die before him. He was simple in his tastes, and his material needs were more than adequately covered for by the pension he received from the United Nations each month. He died without medical care, but was covered by United Nations insurance that would have allowed medical treatment in any country in the world. He was still in good health when he left Dhaka that fateful day. On his desk on the day after his death I found the results of his last blood tests -- they were better than usual. He continued to play golf until his early seventies and every day walked briskly for an hour or more before breakfast.

I hope I have been able to give readers some idea of the nature of the man that was felled by the assassins of January 27, 2005. I have not tried to be more objective than a fond son can be expected to be. My father's autobiography (published a few weeks ago) will perhaps provide a better understanding of his wide-ranging interests as well as his values and beliefs. It also affords rare insights into some momentous events of the last half-century. It is remarkable that he seemed to be an active participant at so many turning points in our history, and that his patriotism and love of the people of this land were reflected in his every action -- from being jailed during the 1952 Language Movement to joining in the work of the Provisional Government during the Liberation War.

Perhaps the most difficult thing for those who loved and respected my father has been the failure and probably even unwillingness of the current government to bring his killers to justice. Only when this is done can my father's soul rest in peace and will it be possible to bring closure to this dark chapter. The arrest and prosecution of a few lower-level operatives of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) notwithstanding, there has been no real effort by local investigators to seek to identify the real masterminds behind this assassination or even find the source of the grenades used in the attack. Many people would now agree with our family's insistence on the need for an independent international investigation of this and other political killings under the current regime. Our family and friends will continue our peaceful campaign of protests until this climate of impunity is ended.

# Letter from Kofi Annan

Dear Mrs. Kibria

It is with great sadness that we remember your late husband and our dear former colleague at the United Nations, Shah AMS Kibria, almost a year after his untimely and tragic assassination on 27 January 2005.

Mr Kibria's legacy as a dedicated and competent high-level international civil servant and a senior government official in the service of his country will continue to be remembered and appreciated by the people of Bangladesh, the international community and those, like myself, who had the privilege of working with him.

It is my sincere hope that the ongoing investigation into the murder of your husband will bring the authors and perpetrators of this heinous act to justice. We at the United Nations will continue to hold him with the highest regard and to honour his years of association with the UN as Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and related assignments.

I am confident that you and the rest of the family will continue to draw strength from the legacy he has left to cope with the heavy personal loss you have endured and to continue your efforts to keep his memory alive.

Kofi Annan, Secretary General, United Nations



# Why has justice not been served?

MAHFUZ ANAM

HERE are two questions that the nation deserves answers to. One, why must a man like Shah AMS Kibria be killed in Bangladeshi politics of today, and second, why gave his killers not been punished even a year after his assassination?

Kibria's killing is not merely a death of a politician (which is bad enough), but also that of a statesman, a globally respected international civil servant, a patriot, and above all, a good human being. In the midst of violence and confrontational politics, his was a voice of reason. When mutual vilification was made the order of the day his voice was one of understanding and working together. Most importantly, when corruption appears to have touched nearly all those who have been in power, Kibria remains a singular exception.

It is not only a national shame, but also a statement on the nature and state of our politics, that his murder remains unsolved till today. Assassinations per se do not make a country or a people look bad. But when very little is done to track down the real murderers and when the government shows inordinate delay in taking the necessary steps to apprehend the criminals, then obviously serious questions as to the sincerity and intention of the investigation comes into question (see story on page 1).

Kibria's murder is a blot on the nation's conscience and the whole nation must raise the demand, as it has done, for the trial of his killers. On the occasion of the first anniversary of his death, we express our deepest respect for Kibria's contribution to our nation building and to the role he played in the international arena. We demand justice and the trial of the killers and those who masterminded the assassination.

# Unforgettable Kibria

KABIR CHOWDHURY

I knew about Mr. Shah AMS Kibria long before I met him face to face and came to know him personally. In course of time he and I came fairly close to each other. On many occasions he spoke from the same platform against social and political violence, religious fundamentalism and the increasing use of muscle power in business and politics.

Shahs Kibria was a unique person. As a human individual, as a family man, as a diplomat, as a top executive in more than one international organisation and lately as a political leader he displayed outstanding qualities of head and heart.

His life was most distinguished and colourful. When the Bangladesh war of liberation began Kibria was serving in the Pakistan embassy in Washington DC. He severed his relation with Pakistan, declared allegiance to the Mujibnagar government of independent and sovereign Bangladesh and worked with great zeal and dedication for creating public opinion in USA in favour of the people of Bangladesh. But all this is known to most of my readers.

A particularly impressive phase of Kibria's life began after his retirement. He chose a new area of activity to give reins to the finely balanced dynamic energy he always felt within him. He joined active politics. Awami League, that played the pioneering role in the liberation war and, after the war, was instrumental in incorporating secularism, democracy, socialism and nationalism under Bangabandhu's leadership in our 1972 constitution, was Kibria's natural choice.

He immediately made a mark in the political scenario of Bangladesh. He was very articulate in condemning the use of black money and hooliganism in politics. He placed a high premium on dialogue, logic and transparency. Kibria was soft spoken and mild-mannered, but firm as a rock where principles were involved. To my knowledge he had no enemy. But I was clearly mistaken. He did have enemies and vicious ones. They were power hungry unprincipled politicians, religious fanatics and militant fundamentalists who wanted to make Bangladesh a backward looking theocratic Islamic state. They feared entry and rise of men like Kibria in their world of politics. So, aided and abetted by Khaleda Zia's four-party alliance government, they fetched their murderous plans and struck the fatal blow on 27 January 2005 by throwing a deadly grenade at Kibria when he was holding a meeting with his workers at Paltan Bazar of Habiganj, Sylhet. Even after being hit by the grenade his life might have been saved if he were rushed to Dhaka by helicopter, but the coterie of Khaleda-Nizami saw to it that no helicopter was made available to dying Kibria, although he was a sitting Member of the Parliament at that time, if nothing else.

Now Kibria is dead. A full year has gone by, but the four party alliance government which constantly boasts of vastly improved law and order situation is yet to find any clue to his murder. Will his killers be ever apprehended and brought to book?

I do not know when will be blessed with another man like Shah AMS Kibria. May his soul rest in peace and may his memory inspire us to emulate him as best as we can.

# A great son of the soil

MOHAMMED FARASHUDDIN

IN paying a warm hearted tribute to a great patriot and in writing about a successful finance minister, the first thing that comes to mind about Late Shah Abu Mohammed Shamsul Kibria (Shah AMS Kibria) is his exceptional willingness to dispassionately look at any issue in a theoretical perspective. It can also be stated without any fear of contradiction that as a Minister of Finance, Kibria kept the welfare of the people, particularly of the disadvantaged, at the softest corner of his heart. That's why the government he served followed a scrupulously crafted policy incorporating the equity considerations in its growth strategy.

Shah AMS Kibria was in favour of economic reforms but his approach was one of patient and incremental implementation primarily with a view to minimising the 'costs' of reforms to the relatively unprivileged. It was not so much on the contents and direction but at the 'slow' pace of implementation of the economic reforms that some quarters were unhappy about Kibria.

That Shah AMS Kibria was an excellent manager of the economy should be acceptable to almost all of those who count. He would, however, not rush on a decision that would have widespread impact. He would rather spend time, energy and efforts in carefully evaluating the pros and cons of a major decision as a finance minister than risk its resultant adverse effects on the economy. For instance, he would not mind an increase in the price of petrol used by the rich but would

resist 'pressure' to raise the price of diesel and kerosene fuelling the economic activities of the poor.

No doubt, Shah AMS Kibria had to walk a tightrope as a finance minister, in matching the unlimited ends of the nation and scarce resources it owned. Equally important was the delicate balancing between political considerations on the one hand and evaluation of merit on the other. He was one of those who believed 'efficiency' itself was a kind of 'loyalty' which a purely 'political eye' may not be able to discern. In most of the major appointments during his tenure as Finance Minister, Kibria would put higher weight on the qualifications of the candidate rather than his or her political inclinations.

In the debate involving a trade off between unemployment and inflation, Kibria would always vigorously support the cause of price stability. This attitude combined well with his astute macro-economic management in achieving impressive economic growth with remarkably low level of inflation. Agriculture sector's unprecedented success benefited particularly from highly subsidised inputs with budgetary support delivered at the right time and in the right place.

Shah AMS Kibria's role in the Financial Sector Reforms, banking reforms in particular, and his unwavering support to the central bank in most matters was a treat to experience. His administrative acumen was very handy in dealing with the worst flood disaster in 1998; he led an excellent and effective system of the relief operations with the consequent bouncing back of an inflation free growth with equity.

A valiant freedom fighter and a thoroughly dignified patriot, Shah AMS Kibria deserves the best of our homages.

# To all our friends and well-wishers

ASMA KIBRIA

THIS past year has been an exceedingly difficult one for our family. Not only have we had to cope with the loss of my husband Shah AMS Kibria and my nephew Shah Manzur Huda after a grenade attack, but also with the knowledge that as my husband lay dying, bleeding from hundreds of shrapnel wounds, he was denied helicopter transportation to Dhaka or proper medical attention.

The willful negligence of the Speaker of Parliament and others has become increasingly exposed, and there is little doubt in most people's minds that very powerful individuals were behind the assassination.

From the very beginning our family has pressed for an international investigation, convinced that local investigators, however competent or well-intentioned, would be unable to resist pressures from their superiors seeking to block a full investigation. Events have proved us correct. Even after a year there has been little progress in uncovering the masterminds, and the government's intentions (in this and the investigations of other political killings) are increasingly suspect, as only a few lower-level members of the ruling party have been charged with the murder. Moreover, the absence of separation of the judiciary from the executive has raised many questions about

the government's control over the judicial process. The terrible consequences of the climate of impunity in which the killers have operated freely are now understood by all.

I would like to thank you all for standing by us in our fight for justice. It has been a lonely struggle at times but we have gained hope and courage from our friends both here and abroad who have spent their valuable time and energy to support our cause or have joined in our peaceful campaign of protests against all political killings. We had warned then that it might be a long struggle for justice but that this would not deter us. I hope our friends will continue to support us in the days ahead, as we work to create the conditions where such campaigns for justice become unnecessary.

The entire nation, and indeed, the very foundations of our Republic are now under attack by the evil forces of hatred, intolerance and greed. The same groups that are behind the killing of my husband and so many others seem to have everything in their favour: money, guns and power. This is no cause for despondency. No one must forget that such an intimidating array of forces has been confronted before in our history, when those who stood united in their belief in a tolerant and just society emerged victorious. There is a tough struggle ahead, but anyone who believes in the courage and determination of the common people of this country should have no doubt about the outcome.

