

TAJUDDIN AHMAD'S 95TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

The Art of Being Tajuddin Ahmad



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

NEARLY half a century after the 1971 War of Liberation, it is perhaps difficult to produce or come across startlingly original ideas about Tajuddin Ahmad. But

it is always instructive to study the existing literature on his political career, primarily because of the lessons it provides, but also because it helps us see the history of our independence struggle in a broader context in terms of its relation to other forces and influences that were at play. Tajuddin's active life was a relatively short one, marked by momentous changes both in this region and around the world. To understand Tajuddin is to understand the interplay of these changes in which he was both a keen observer and an active participant.

As history shows us, Tajuddin's career took off at a time when the world was in constant flux. He saw the painful birth of India and Pakistan through an ill-conceived Partition orchestrated by the British. Globally, the imperialists were on the run. Between 1945 and 1960, about three dozen new states in Asia and Africa achieved autonomy or outright independence from their colonial rulers. The creation of so many new countries within this short period coincided with the new Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, which would both influence and be influenced by these developments, altering the composition of the global geopolitical scene and deepening the political complexity of nearly every region in the world. Bangladesh's independence in 1971, of which Tajuddin was one of the chief architects, cannot be seen in isolation from these developments.

Tajuddin's role, until that point, was that of a grassroots organiser and strategist. As general secretary of Awami League and a close confidante of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, he would get Bangabandhu's approval for all policy decisions and strategies while Bangabandhu would engage with the public to get them

behind those decisions. They were a perfect team—one carrying the torch of independence and the other, averse to publicity, providing him with backstage support. However, after the brutal crackdown of Pakistan on innocent Bengali civilians on March 25, followed by Bangabandhu's arrest, Tajuddin found himself suddenly alone. He soon realised that it was now up to him to carry that torch forward and lead the strenuous task of organising the lines of defence from the ground up, legitimising the rightful demand of his people for self-determination through forming a government by their elected representatives, and mobilising international support for their cause.

We get a good glimpse of his activities in the next nine months from the authoritative book of Mueyedul Hasan titled "Muldhara: 71". The book details the many challenges he faced after the April 17 oath-taking ceremony of the provisional "Mujibnagar" government (so called because of the name of the place where the ceremony was held). The government-in-exile in Kolkata, the legal basis of which was provided by the Proclamation of Independence issued on April 10—just 15 days into the Pakistani clampdown—was divided into 15 ministries and divisions. Its quick formation, besides the obvious reasons for which it was set up, also helped Awami League avert a leadership crisis in the absence of Bangabandhu. Many Bengali diplomats and members of the Civil Service of Pakistan also defected to the newly established government headed by Tajuddin Ahmad, its prime minister.

Tajuddin and his cabinet colleagues quickly set the administration on the path of achieving a number of short and long-term goals. Foremost among them: training and securing arms for the freedom fighters, building a regular army, advancing the resistance fight through both conventional and irregular warfare, rehabilitating the refugees in India, securing recognition from the international community, building an effective line of communication, freeing Bangabandhu from the Pakistani prison, etc.

Mueyedul Hasan's exhaustive analysis of subsequent developments shows how the war was as much a physical one as a political one. Tajuddin was quick to

realise that for any pushback against the Pakistani occupation to be successful in the long run, it was important to secure international support without which it would be viewed as an anti-Pakistani plot of India. His grasp of geopolitical issues, especially the complex ways in which global powers function, afforded him an insight into their inner workings. Each power that had a stake in the future of this conflict would have its own reason for its intervention or lack thereof. It was also vital to secure unstinted support from all political parties of Bangladesh for which a more inclusive approach of governance would be needed, which was no easy task. There were also internal divisions within

non-communalism. The third reason was a humanitarian one, ignited by the Pakistani brutalities targeting innocent civilians. But there were also risks to consider: any direct military intervention from India could be used by Pakistan to turn its "civil war" into an Indo-Pak war which could pave the way for military intervention from the US and China. The US, ignoring world opinion and the plight of the persecuted Bengalis, was already playing a very active role in Pakistan's favour. In terms of powerful allies, India still had none. So without securing support from the Soviet Union to tip the scales in its favour, it couldn't risk getting involved militarily even if it meant prolonging

borders never really materialised.

Tajuddin followed these developments closely and aided, when necessary, the Indian bid to counterbalance the US threat. His realistic appraisal of the situation was vital to the government's international engagement efforts as well as adopting supportive policies. Despite the many challenges on multiple fronts, limited resources and the constraints of having to work on the soil of another country, the Mujibnagar government was successful in putting together a civil administration which worked with remarkable efficiency given the situation. Tajuddin also had to act decisively to keep the administration nonpartisan. Besides organising the whole military and political response to the emerging situations, he and those involved with the government also successfully ensured effective coordination of various activities and kept the momentum alive both for the trainees and freedom fighters back home. By December, the Pakistani confidence was largely shattered and their military position considerably weakened. Finally, when the Indian army officially entered the war on December 3, victory for the joint forces was only a matter of time.

The independence came through the efforts and sacrifices of countless people both at home and outside. Tajuddin's extraordinary leadership along with the fearless efforts of his administration and comrades was the glue that held them all together and channelled their efforts to secure independence finally.

There are many things to learn from Tajuddin's short yet illustrious career: his organisational acumen, political and diplomatic wisdom, and his quiet work as a nation builder, which suggest a blend of vision and pragmatism inherent to great leaders. But his most glorious moment is indeed his role during the war. In short, the art of being Tajuddin Ahmad in 1971 is the art of navigating a complex landscape of conflicting geopolitical priorities and meeting extraordinary challenges with equally extraordinary courage and foresight, while never losing hope in the potential of his people.

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Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (left) and Tajuddin Ahmad.

the exiled Awami League leadership and resistance to his own authority as prime minister. Addressing all these challenges successfully would require extraordinary political foresight and extensive diplomatic effort.

For India, which gave shelter to millions of refugees from Bangladesh fleeing the war and provided training and military support in different phases, there were ostensibly three reasons for supporting the cause of liberation, according to Mueyedul. First, its continued hostile relations with Pakistan and prior support for the Bengali demand for autonomy. Second, the ideological proximity between Awami League and the ruling Congress Party, especially on issues of parliamentary democracy and

the refugee crisis. The much-needed commitment of support came on September 28-29, when Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi met with top Soviet leaders in Moscow and both sides released a joint statement expressing their solidarity for the Bengali cause (Moscow had earlier described the US' interference as a move towards "Vietnamisation of East Bengal conflict"). This meeting is regarded as a major turning point in the history of the war as it meant that India could, with the Soviet Union at its side, now act more boldly. Meanwhile, China proved to be an unreliable ally for Pakistan although it had been supplying arms to it since the beginning. The US plan to get China to keep India on a short leash by creating tensions at their shared

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Trump's Ancient Ballot Lie



DAVID STASAVAGE

AS the United States heads toward its most significant and contentious presidential election in a very long time, there is much talk about voting by mail. Some see this

option as necessary to ensure ballot access for all amid the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly blue-collar workers and minority groups, who have disproportionately high infection rates. But others, including President Donald Trump, vociferously oppose mail-in ballots, pointing to a purported risk of fraud.

Their argument is bogus—and not exactly new. For the last six centuries, those seeking to limit the franchise have sought to achieve their goals by citing the need to maintain the "integrity" of the electoral system. Consider England in the early fifteenth century. At that time, each English county sent two "knights of the shire" as representatives to parliament. And because there was no formal law governing how these knights (a largely honorific term) would be selected, it fell to each county's sheriff to organise

an election. By custom, all free male inhabitants of a county had the right to participate, while women were excluded. Some of these elections were no doubt rowdy and undisciplined—as democracy often is—but they allowed for much greater (male) participation than would soon be the case. In 1429, members of the House of Commons petitioned King Henry VI to agree to a new law ostensibly intended

to ensure that county elections to parliament proceeded peacefully. The petition stated that without this new law, "homicides, riots, assaults, and divisions will most probably arise and occur." In other words, the law's backers claimed, the integrity of the

electoral process was in danger. But the parliamentarians' proposed method of addressing the perceived problem betrayed their true motivation. They called for the county election franchise to be restricted to those who owned land with an annual return of at least 40 shillings, a significant sum at the time.

The root cause of the problem, as the law's supporters saw it, was "the too great and excessive numbers of 40-shilling rule was an anachronism. But then a new twist to the story brought about a feature of voting that we view as sacred today. Some members of parliament advocated not only expanding the franchise, but also making the ballot for elections to the House of Commons secret. Since time immemorial, voting in county elections had taken place in public, enabling people with means to intimidate or bribe others to vote as instructed. But it would be another 40 years before parliament finally adopted the 1872 Ballot Act. One of the main reasons for the delay in introducing secret balloting was that opponents argued—once again—that it would jeopardise the integrity of the electoral process. Some MPs had proposed a secret ballot as early as 1830, but others argued then that such a measure would result in "eternal suspicion and hypocrisy." In 1862, another opponent of secret ballots said much the same thing, claiming that, "instead of being a check on bribery, it would facilitate it by preventing detection in many cases." Sadly, such arguments are being echoed today in the US, which has entered a new era of voting restrictions that recalls its past disenfranchisement of African-Americans. In recent years, 25 US states have passed laws that make it more difficult to vote, such as by requiring a photo ID or even proof

of citizenship. States have also limited turnout by reducing the number of polling stations. The clear effect of these measures is to tilt the playing field against low-income and minority groups. Much like in England 600 years ago, the stated objective—preserving the integrity of the electoral process—is just a convenient smokescreen. In the US debate over voting by mail—a measure supported by a large majority of American adults—opponents of broad electoral participation are once again raising the spectre of fraud and corruption to pursue narrow partisan goals. Without citing any evidence, they claim that this new voting system is somehow subject to greater irregularities than traditional in-person voting.

people" who had been participating in elections. The 40-shilling rule became law in England in 1430, and would not be repealed until parliament passed the Great Reform Act of 1832. With that act, parliament had finally come around to the idea that the

of citizenship. States have also limited turnout by reducing the number of polling stations. The clear effect of these measures is to tilt the playing field against low-income and minority groups. Much like in England 600 years ago, the stated objective—preserving the integrity of the electoral process—is just a convenient smokescreen. In the US debate over voting by mail—a measure supported by a large majority of American adults—opponents of broad electoral participation are once again raising the spectre of fraud and corruption to pursue narrow partisan goals. Without citing any evidence, they claim that this new voting system is somehow subject to greater irregularities than traditional in-person voting.

But the real fear of Trump and others is that mail-in voting will boost turnout and aid Democratic candidates, even though it is not even certain that such an effect exists in states that already allow it. We can only hope that the advocates of expanded suffrage will eventually resume their winning streak.

David Stasavage is Dean for the Social Sciences at New York University and author of *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today* (Princeton University Press 2020). Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2020. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

JULY 23, 1952
Egyptian monarchy toppled by coup

On this day in 1952, the Free Officers, a nationalistic military group led by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, engineered a coup that overthrew King Farouk I of Egypt, ending the monarchy and bringing Nasser to power.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Martian feature
- 7 Told tales
- 11 Sermon
- 12 Old Atlanta arena
- 13 Like some mushrooms
- 14 "— Las Vegas"
- 15 Pet store buys
- 16 Doled (out)
- 17 Shoelace problem
- 18 Esprit de corps
- 19 Pronto, in memos
- 21 Huck's pal
- 22 Southern drink
- 25 Heir, often
- 26 Tug-of-war need
- 27 Online icon
- 29 Fling
- 33 Submerged
- 34 Number after cuatro
- 35 Do copy work
- 36 Patrol boat
- 37 Celtic letter
- 38 Suave
- 39 Went 90
- 40 Small frog

DOWN

- 1 Look into
- 2 Flying reptile of movies
- 3 Baja buddy
- 4 Like Sherpas
- 5 Pipe bends
- 6 Reuben base
- 7 Romantic sort
- 8 Parrot
- 9 Completely enclose
- 10 Small crown
- 16 Complete, as business
- 18 College study
- 20 Sipping aid
- 22 Set an earlier time for
- 23 Straight
- 24 Beatles classic
- 25 Cavalry weapons
- 28 Lugged
- 30 Like bar beer
- 31 Play part
- 32 More ticked off
- 34 Make sound
- 36 Recipe unit

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	A	L	A	D	R	A	V	E	R
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
CLEANSING MY PALATE BETWEEN COURSES

IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'LL NEED ANOTHER SIX-PACK

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

CMON, WREN! FINISH YOUR OATMEAL!

YEEEOOWWWW! OPEN THE HUNGAR AND LET THE AIRPLANE INSIDE!

TROUBLE ON THE TARMAC?

TOWEL, PLEASE.