

# Looking at the November coups through a neutral lens



**N**EWSPAPER articles published on the military coups held in Dhaka in November 1975 are often coloured by the authors' political standpoints and ideologies. Instead of making an unbiased and objective assessment of historical

events, attempts are made in such articles to highlight particular facts and extol certain individuals. In her 1967 essay *Truth and Politics*, the German political philosopher Hannah Arendt notes that historical reality is sometimes distorted in order to attain specific political objectives or to support certain people. For her, through the purposeful omission and denial of facts known to everyone, an alternative reality is often constructed that remains far from being factual. It would be a shame to see similar tendencies in our country that may lead to the creation of a substitute reality. Critical and impartial analysis is of utmost importance in articles dealing with historical facts in order to keep people informed of the whole truth about particular events of the past.

Ziaur Rahman, Khaled Mosharraf, and Abu Taher—three military officers became key figures in the coups of November 1975. All of them were decorated freedom fighters. In 1971, they fought valiantly for the independence of Bangladesh. But, after four years they came up against each other and the country witnessed the tragic consequences of their conflicts. After August 15, 1975 Majors Farook and Rashid and a few other junior officers involved in the killings of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family members and close associates, attained power through their close association with the new President Khondakar Mostaq Ahmad. These junior officers started showing a total disregard for the army chain of command. New Army Chief Ziaur Rahman did not force them to return to the cantonment.[1]

On November 3, then Chief of General Staff of the army Khaled Mosharraf and his loyal officers took measures to bring these junior officers under control. The Khaled-led coup began by placing Zia under house arrest. The battle-seasoned infantry regiments and the fighter jets of the Air Force were ready to help Khaled against 1st Bengal Lancers, the sole tank regiment of the Bangladesh Army and 2nd Field Artillery Regiment, the two units that took part in the killing of Bangabandhu and were loyal to Farook and Rashid. In the following few days, the junior officers departed the country, and the president and the army chief offered their resignations. Khaled Mosharraf became the new army chief. However, the success of Khaled Mosharraf's coup was short-lived.

After taking an early retirement from the army in 1972, Abu Taher started working in a government organisation. He also joined the

left-wing political party Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) secretly and became the head of the party's combat wing named Gono Bahini.

[2] A secret branch of Gono Bahini named Biplobi Sainik Shongstha (Revolutionary Soldiers' Organisation) was formed in the army.[3] Abu Taher instructed the soldiers of this outfit to start an ordinary soldiers' revolution on November 7 with a view to transforming the armed forces into a people's army committed to safeguarding the interests of the underprivileged class. He also instructed them to free Ziaur Rahman on November 7.[4] Leaflets conveying 12-point demands of Biplobi Sainik Shongstha were distributed among the soldiers in Dhaka Cantonment.[5] They demanded that the differences between officers and soldiers should be abolished, and the officers could not be recruited separately.[6] When soldiers loyal to Taher staged a revolt on November 7 by chanting slogans seeking unity of ordinary soldiers, the infantry battalions

the pivotal role in making the counter-coup successful. Fearing that they would be severely punished for their involvement in August 15 killings, the members of these two units became desperate to depose Khaled Mosharraf. Thus, they actively joined the action on November 7.[11] They had no loyalty to Taher whatsoever.[12] In 1976, through a controversial trial, Abu Taher was hanged. Although Ziaur Rahman triumphed over adverse circumstances and his rivals for the time being, he was assassinated by some military officers in 1981.

Most of the army and air force officers actively taking part in the Khaled-led coup were freedom fighters. But, some freedom fighter officers of the infantry battalions were close to Zia.[13] They did not directly express discontent at Khaled's coup, but they also did not give Khaled their total allegiance. In order to keep a tight grip on the situation it was necessary for Khaled to communicate

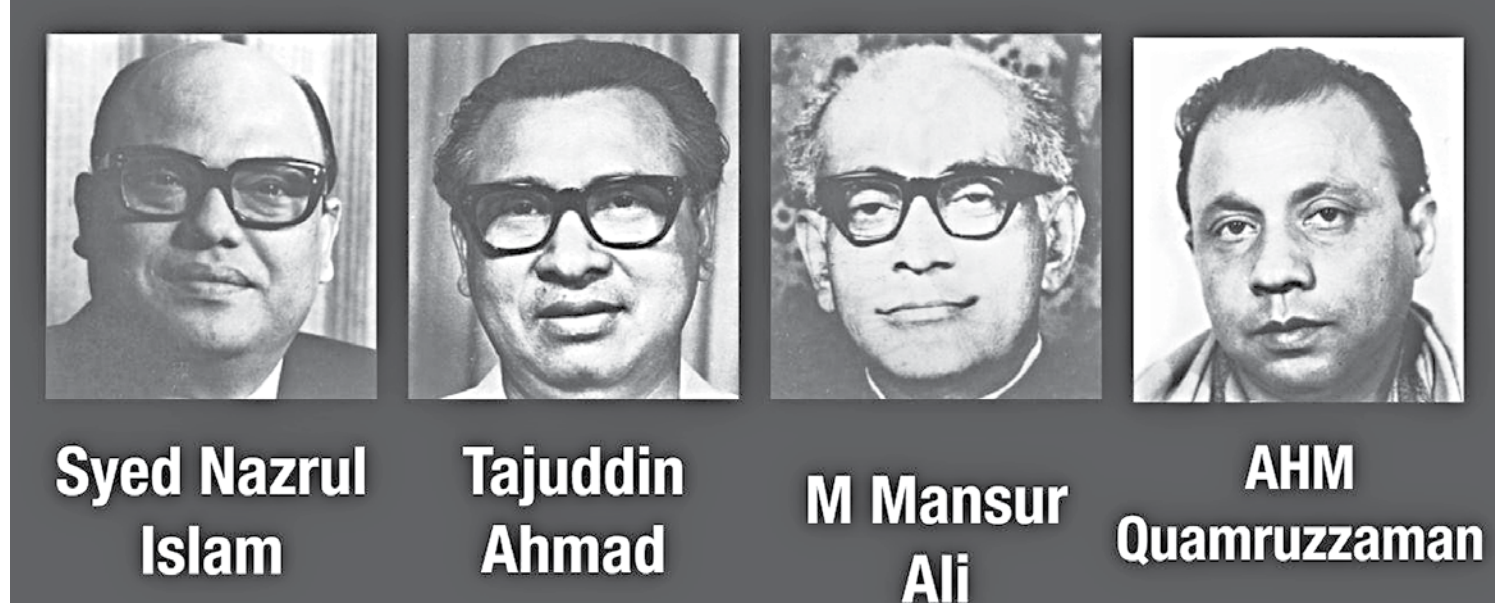
the roads carrying photos of Mostaq.[15] In a meeting on November 6, Taher and the leaders of Biplobi Sainik Shongstha finalised their plans for the uprising. They did not prevent the right-wing soldiers of Bengal Lancers from participating in that meeting.[16] How could Taher and the JSD leaders expect that the right-wing soldiers totally devoted to the killers of Bangabandhu would wholeheartedly support a left-wing revolution?

In the early hours of November 7, Major Mohiuddin, an artillery officer involved in the killing of Bangabandhu took Ziaur Rahman to the 2nd Field Artillery Regiment.[17] Both freedom fighter and repatriated officers close to Zia gathered in 2nd Field Artillery office and started cooperating with Zia. Within a short time it became clear that neither Zia nor the other officers had any intention of changing the traditional structure of the army. Some soldiers remained unruly for a few days, but soon they were made to obey the chain

not think of the necessity to tighten security of four leaders in that precarious situation and did not even hear that the leaders had been slain.[19] They heard about the heinous assassination only after the departure of Farook-Rashid and their cohorts from the country. Khaled's coup removed the killers of Bangabandhu from the position of power but it was a major failure of Khaled and his companions that they could not save the four national leaders.

On November 7, Khaled Mosharraf and two other eminent freedom fighter officers, Colonel Najmul Huda and Lt Colonel ATM Haider, were killed in 10 Bengal Regiment. During the Liberation War, K Force was formed under the leadership of Khaled Mosharraf and 10 Bengal Regiment was one of the units of K Force.[20] Thus, it was likely that the officers and troops of this regiment would protect their wartime commander from danger. But Khaled, Huda, and Haider were brutally killed in this regiment by a few officers and soldiers.[21] It is still unknown who instigated or ordered them to kill these renowned freedom fighter officers. A thorough investigation is necessary to identify the person or people responsible for the murder of the three war heroes on November 7, 1975.

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The four national leaders who were brutally murdered in jail on November 3, 1975.

loyal to Khaled became confused and did not try to suppress the counter-coup.[7] Khaled Mosharraf took shelter in an infantry battalion which came from Rangpur Brigade to support him. But, Khaled was ruthlessly murdered in this battalion.[8]

The soldiers freed Ziaur Rahman and he was reinstated as the army chief. Much to Taher's dissatisfaction, Zia did not show any interest in abiding by most of the demands of Biplobi Sainik Shongstha.[9] Within a few weeks Taher was arrested. Biplobi Sainik Shongstha could not offer any resistance to this decision. Mainly the JCOs, NCOs and soldiers of the supporting arms such as Signals and different army services such as Ordinance, Supply, EME, AMC, etc. and some airmen were members of Biplobi Sainik Shongstha.[10] Although they organised the revolt against Khaled Mosharraf, Bengal Lancers and 2nd Field Artillery played

with the officers and soldiers throughout the country and keep them informed of his aims. But, despite the request from the other officers, Khaled did not give a speech on the radio.

[14] As no speech was given on the radio for three days, the civilians as well as the military units remained confused about the incidents happening inside Dhaka Cantonment. Khaled's detachment from the rank and file made it easier for Biplobi Sainik Shongstha to stimulate the ordinary soldiers to take part in a rebellion against the officers.

Khaled's coup was important because it neutralised the tank and artillery regiments involved in the killing of Bangabandhu. Khaled and his companions compelled the mutinous troops of Bengal Lancers to return to cantonment with their tanks. But on November 7, those tanks came out of the cantonment again and jubilant Lancers soldiers rejoiced on

of command. The majority soldiers of the armed forces did not insist on implementing the demands of Biplobi Sainik Shongstha. As most of the soldiers were not eager to see revolutionary changes in the army, such an endeavour was bound to end in failure.

Khaled and his fellow officers did not try to free four national leaders immediately after commencing their coup. But, as soon as the killers of Bangabandhu became aware of an imminent offensive against them, they sent a small group of soldiers to the central jail to eliminate the national leaders. It is known that Khondakar Mostaq telephoned the IG Prison and ordered him to allow the armed soldiers to enter the jail.[18] The soldiers went to the cell where the four leaders were kept and brutally killed them. Khaled and his companions were busy negotiating with the junior officers and Mostaq in order to find a solution. They did

[1] Shafaat Jamil, *Ektorer Muktijuddho, Roktakto Moddho-August o Shorojontromoy November* (Dhaka: Sahitya Prakash, 1998), 130, 132. [2] Altaf Parvez (edited), *Ashamapto Muktijuddho, Colonel Taher o Jasad Raajinitu* (Dhaka: Pathak Shamabesh, 1995), 101; Hafiz Uddin Ahmad Bir Bikrom, *Sainik Jibon: Gowraber Ektor, Roktakto Pocharto* (Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashon, 2020), 211. [3] *Ibid.*, 100. [4] Dr. M. Anwar Hossain, *Mahan Muktijuddho o 7 November Obhuthan e Colonel Taher* (Dhaka: Agami Prokashoni, 2012), 88-90; Altaf Parvez, 135. [5] Dr. M. Anwar Hossain, 89. [6] Altaf Parvez, 135. [7] Shafaat Jamil, 145-46; Major Nasir Uddin, *Gonotontre Biponno Dharai Bangladesh er Shosoto Bahini* (Dhaka: Agami Prokashoni, 1997), 148. [8] Major Nasir Uddin, 151; [9] *Ibid.*, 148-49; Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, 227-28. [10] Altaf Parvez, 135; Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, 228. [11] Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, 228; Altaf Parvez, 144. [12] *Ibid.* [13] Major Nasir Uddin, 125. [14] Major Nasir Uddin, 136; Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, 207-08, 225. [15] Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, 228; Altaf Parvez, 144. [16] Dr. M. Anwar Hossain, 99-100. [17] Shafaat Jamil, 144; Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, 221. [18] Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, 198; Mohiuddin Ahmad, Bela Obela: *Bangladesh 1972-1975* (Dhaka: Baatighar, 2020), 293. [19] Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, 198; Shafaat Jamil, 136. [20] Jafar Imam Bir Bikrom, *Dam Diye Kinechi Ai Bangla* (Dhaka: Oitijhya, 2016), 65. [21] Shafaat Jamil, 144-45; Hafiz Uddin Ahmad, 223.

## Is democracy at risk?

MAJ GEN MD SARWAR HOSSAIN, BSP, SGP, NDC, HDMC, PSC (RETD)

**W**E are living in a world which has been primarily shaped by a number of democratic countries over the last 70-plus years, following WWII, in which economic institutions have promoted movements of goods, services, investments, people, idea and technology from one end to the other, leading to mutual prosperity. The system worked and we have achieved remarkable economic growth through which hundreds of millions of people have been pulled out of poverty in many different countries. The trajectory of other social indices, for example, under five mortality rate, literacy rate, maternal health, female empowerment and so on, are also on the rise.

In the 1970s, there were about 30-35 democratic countries that rose to 115-120 by the start of the 21st century, depending on the degree of democracy they practice. A US NGO named Freedom House has measured a decline in democracy and freedom worldwide. It posed a serious question: Does the fact of elections, even where the outcome is autocratically determined, qualify a country to be considered a democracy? It is a really hard question to answer. But it may be said that there are now

about 25 fewer democratic countries than there were at the start of the millennium.

It looks like liberal democracy is receding across the globe. If we look at the current trend in the world politics, it seems to be shifting from an axis that had been defined between a left and a right, which ideologically disagreed essentially over economic issues. The left always wanted more equality, more social protection and a stronger state that could provide more services and redistribution to citizens. The right wanted more economic freedom; they liked capitalism and markets and wanted more socially conservative values. That was the basic dichotomy in much of the 20th century politics.

Russia and China are more autocratic than ever before, advancing with unstoppable pace. Even during the pandemic, China did not suffer economically nearly as much as the world's democracies. It has an advantage that it is one of the most regimented nations on earth and therefore is able to implement its plans effectively.

In a globalised world, mutual trading benefits all, but when people start crossing with goods legally or illegally, they tend to challenge the lives, entities and customs of the host countries. Due to these factors, people voted for Brexit in the UK and for Donald Trump as

the 45th US President. Today, with the rise of leaders like President Erdogan in Turkey, Prime Minister Orban in Hungary, Modi in India, Mateusz Jakub Morawiecki of law and justice party in Poland, we are now living in a world which is defined not by the traditional left-right spectrum, but by identity.

In November 2018, prior to the midterm election, while delivering a speech, Donald Trump was advised by the traditional republicans to say that unemployment is very low, the economy is growing, everybody has a job because of tax cuts and deregulations. Instead, Trump went on to criticise the migrants approaching the southern border. He even deployed the army to defend America against the migrant invasion.

There are different varieties of populist leaders. The first kind are those who advocate economic or social policies that feels good in the short term but are unsustainable in the long run. For example, the late Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, who was providing free eye clinic, subsidised groceries and gasoline, all of which was dependent on high oil prices. Once the price of oil fell in 2014, his regime started to collapse.

The second kind is something to do with the style of politics. Populist leaders tend to be charismatic, that is to say they claim

to have direct relationship with the people they claim to represent. Their charisma is represented in the person rather than through institutions. In fact, most populist politicians don't like institutions. They instead seek to do whatever they can to undermine institutions. Institutions like rule of law, free media, impartial bureaucracy—all these stand in the way of populist leaders in accomplishing their purposes.

And the last kind of populist leaders are those who represent the people, but often, not all the people. They value certain ethnic groups or traditional ethnic groups more than others. A contemporary example could be Prime Minister Modi of India, which is an incredibly diverse country in terms of religion, language, caste and geographic region. But under Modi, Hindu nationalism again took root in India, disregarding people from other faiths. This has also been reflected by the way his government tried to enact the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC). Prime Minister Victor Orban of Hungary is another who clearly said that the Hungarian national identity is based on Hungarian ethnicity. The danger of this type of populism is fairly evident as they destroy liberal democracy and the liberal international order.

We saw how the US played a much wider role following WWII. That included global leadership, promotion of the liberal international order, freedom, democracy, and human rights, and preventing the rise of regional hegemony in Eurasia. It's therefore understandable that in a unipolar world, US policy made an even deeper impact. Sadly, when countries tried to deal with global issues like the refugee problem using the so-called ultra-nationalist rhetoric particularly in several European countries, it didn't work out well. If we look at the US, it is the lower and middle-income, less educated people, who felt that their lives and jobs were threatened by immigrants.

Since 1970, Asia's per-capita incomes have increased fivefold, the asset value of the world's leading billionaires has risen fivefold since 1988 and following China's WTO accession in 2001, US's trade deficit with China alone went up by almost fivefold. These issues, with all of the above combined, largely influenced the rise of populist politics. It is time that democratic leaders across the globe redefine their politics so as to address the global issues for human wellbeing and unity, not just for meeting greed as the last for power.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**RABINDRANATH TAGORE**  
(1861-1941)  
Bengali poet, short-story writer, song composer, playwright, essayist, and painter.

*Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

1	Motionless	37	Bird of myth	18	Strong winds
6	Programming pro	38	Debtor's letters	19	Blue egg layer
11	Banks of the Clubs	41	Is grateful	20	Use the track
12	Wonderland visitor	44	News item	21	Curved path
13	Does a walter's job	45	Find darling	22	Buddy
15	Secret agent	46	Transmits	24	Receipt line
16	Easy victim	47	Sub system	25	Lincoln nickname
17	Chiding sound	<b>DOWN</b>		26	Went ahead
18	Errand runner	1	Hardens	30	Historic happenings
20	Osaka setting	2	Snare	31	Coffee shop orders
23	Add up	3	Black as night	33	Young one
27	Spoken	4	Tell tales	34	Historic times
28	Movie pig	5	Course unit	35	Not recorded
29	Staff symbol	6	Runner, for example	36	Smooth
31	Blended	7	Outdated	38	A party to
32	Squelch	8	Slimming plan	39	Gumbo vegetable
34	Pub quaff	9	Beige	40	Manual reader
		10	Take a breather	42	Finale
		14	Clumsy fellow	43	Hoopla

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

P	U	T	P	H	E	W
C	A	N	O	E	R	A
A	R	E	N	A	O	L
R	A	V	E	R	S	T
O	D	E	S	H	O	N
M	E	N	C	A	P	E
C	O	A	T	E	D	A
H	A	M	M	E	R	A
E	V	E	L	S	A	V
M	E	L	O	N	C	O
I	R	E	N	E	R	I
S	T	E	W	E	D	D

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinon@gmail.com.

**BEETLE BAILEY**

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO TONIGHT?  
I DON'T CARE, WHATEVER YOU WANT TO DO  
I WISH YOU'D BE MORE DECISIVE SOMETIMES AND TAKE CHARGE  
OKAY, I'VE DECIDED THAT YOU SHOULD BE IN CHARGE TONIGHT

**BABY BLUES**

AHHH!  
I LOVE IT WHEN THE KIDS FINALLY GET TO BED AND WE CAN RELAX...  
...FOR ABOUT A TENTH OF A SECOND.  
I HATE MY THIGH