

# bangabandhu

## In Memoriam

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In Retrospect: Pages from a 1972 Diary

### Sheikh Mujib: The Evolution of a Great Leader

By S. M. Ali

"I am poor, I am empty-handed. Please take my love For that is all I have."

Poet Rabindranath Tagore, quoted by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in a speech in Calcutta on February 6, 1972

"Man is only truly great when he acts from the passions."

Benjamin Disraeli

IN EVERY POLITICAL discussion in Dhaka, or elsewhere in Bangladesh, even the articulate Bengalis usually take a pause before asking, "What about Mujib? How is he doing?" Similarly, I have had difficulties, some inexplicable hesitation, in reaching the stage when a close look at Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the man and the politician, is not only necessary but unavoidable.

There are reasons why most of my fellow countrymen showed considerable reluctance to discuss the Sheikh as candidly as they debated — and criticised — the government, or the ruling Awami League. Mujib is both the Awami League and the government; Mujib is also the Father of the Nation. So, while criticising the administration and discussing all its shortcomings, many would avoid all mention of the Sheikh as though the Prime Minister and the government stood apart. A few would say, a little defensively, "Maybe Bangabandhu is not fully aware of these problems; some would assert. The administration has let down the Sheikh."

To most Bengalis, even to those who disapprove of the Awami League, the Sheikh is the real hope for Bangladesh, a hope they do not want to give up. A leader who spent some eleven years in prison, twice came very close to the gallows, first during the infamous Agartala Conspiracy Case\* staged by Ayub in December 1967; and then by Yahya during the Bangladesh liberation struggle. Mujib is the triumph of survival, a gift that many believe the leader can now pass on to his nation. That Mujib has won the hearts of mil-

ions of his people, inside and outside the country, by his courage, fearlessness and steadfast devotion to the cause of his people is now acknowledged by all, regardless of their opinion of Mujib as a politician. And when the Sheikh fails to win anyone by his courage, he wins him by his charisma and personal charm or, if he is addressing a meeting, by his powerful oratory and uncanny ability to communicate with the audience, regardless of the size of the crowd. I suspect television and radio, which he has so far seldom used, would hardly do full justice to his appeal for the masses.

Of course, Sheikh Mujib himself is fully conscious — some say, a little overconscious — of his hold over the masses and of his close relationship with his people, which, at times, but not always, transcends political affiliations. The Prime Minister talks about this relationship quite often, in his usual overconfident tone. A good example of this was his short speech on January 10, 1972, at New Delhi's Palam Airport where he had made a stopover after his release from prison in Pakistan. After describing his trip as "a journey from darkness to light," the Sheikh said, "In these nine months my people have traversed centuries. When I was taken away from my people, they wept; when I was held in captivity, they fought; and now when I go back to them, they are victorious."

"My people love me," is an oft-quoted remark of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In foreign press reports, the claim is sometimes treated with a touch of snecr, which is unfortunate, because the Sheikh says this in all sincerity and apparently derives his real strength as a leader from this "love of my people."

As a man, the leader of his people, Sheikh Mujib represents a phenomenon in Bangladesh, which works against all odds and survives many possible challenges to the personal authority of the 52-year old architect of the young state.

However, this leader of outstanding personal courage and tremendous charm who has a

beautiful love affair going with his people, is also a politician, the head of an administration and the Prime Minister of a country of 75 million people. While he exudes his personal charm and exercises his charisma over his people, he also handles power, runs an administration, formulates policies, issues directives and operates a party machine.

While it would be totally impossible to separate Mujib, the politician, from Mujib, the man, the two can often appear as separate entities. To the critics of the regime, Mujib, the man also sometimes obscures, and shields, the politician Sheikh, especially when some serious blunders committed by the government become topics for serious discussion at home and abroad. While a great deal has been said, inside Bangladesh and outside, about Mujib the man, let us, for a change, look at the politician who is often hiding behind the man, and trace his career.

#### Good Orator

A STUDENT LEADER of some eminence in pre-partition Bengal, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman plunged into politics soon after the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947. His entry into the student politics in Dhaka University where he was admitted into the Faculty of Law did not create much of a stir. But he was noticed because he was a good orator and because he enjoyed the backing of a small group of Muslim League politicians — including Hussain Shahid Suhrawardy, the former Chief Minister of undivided Bengal, who were already mobilising their forces against the autocratic rule of Liaquat Ali Khan, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan. Those who knew the Sheikh, a tall handsome young man with a trim moustache, could hardly see in him the future Father of the Nation of the Republic of Bangladesh.

Those were the days when, through the Language Movement launched by the students in February, 1948 to demand equal treatment for Bengali and Urdu as official languages of Pakistan, the pro-Communist leftists and their sympathisers had captured the lime-light. Men like Mohammad Toaha, Munier Chowdhury, later a professor of Bengali in Dhaka University and killed by the Pakistani army during the liberation struggle; Oil Ahad, an Opposition politician in Bangladesh; and Tasadduq Ahmed, now living in London, emerged as radical youth leaders. Tajuddin Ahmed, another Muslim League student leader later the Finance Minister of Bangladesh was certainly closer to the group than Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who probably had already developed, his distrust of the left student movement in what was then East Pakistan.

The leftist student leadership in the Dhaka University had its misgivings about the Sheikh and his moderate role. But Mujib probably already knew that he was capable of taking over the leadership of a non-communist, or a thinly-disguised anti-communist, mass movement, provided he completely identified himself with the growing nationalist trends in East Pakistan politics.

"I was born into a middle-class family. By being closely associated with peasants, I know what oppression is.

Through the ages, peasants have been oppressed in this country, as have all working people, including labourers and intellectuals.

This country has known oppression by feudal land-owners, moneylenders and parasite businessmen. Oppressors were also imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The golden people of this country became desperate through this oppression. Which is the way to freedom? That question drove me despair too.

But I found the road. Some of my progressive friends and fraternal political parties spoke of class struggle.

### "I Speak of Nationalism ..."

"... and socialism, secularism, democracy". The four principles formed the core of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's political thinking. In an interview which formed a brief introductory chapter of Khondker Mohammad Ilyas's book *Mujibbad* published on Dec. 16, 1972, Bangabandhu spoke of his political philosophies. Here are some excerpts of Mujib's replies:

But I spoke of nationalism. Jinnahism spread the poison of communalism to every corner of this country. In reply, I say this: Let every man practice his own religion, and that is the basis of secularism.

At the same time, I speak of democracy and socialism. I want socialism in order to establish an exploitation-free social system.

But not through bloodshed. I want to establish socialism through democratic means, through parliamentary means and practices.

I have formulated and based my ideology on the prevailing reality of Bangladesh and after

analysing its historical context. The Soviet Union, China, Yugoslavia have all built socialism according to their individual positions.

I believe Bangladesh too has to find its own way to progress, through the four principles of nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism.

#### Nationalism

Its true nationalism can assume a repulsive, horrifying form, as in Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, Dr. Verwoerd's South Africa, Pakistan of the Punjab, Khans or Zionist Israel. That nationalism is right-wing and reactionary.

However, my nationalism is left-wing and progressive.

If you study the character and pattern of expansion of extreme and narrow nationalism of Nazi Germany, fascists Punjab, racist South

Africa or Zionist Israel, you'll find that their main strength lies in monopoly capitalism, feudalism, imperialism, colonialism, militarism and bureaucraticism. They are enemies of democracy as well as socialism. That's the nationalism of the oppressor.

My nationalism is the nationalism of the oppressed. The Awami League, which is a party formed by the coming together of peasants, workers, students and the intellectual classes, is at the vanguard of my nationalism.

Therefore, the nationalism that is the main pillar of my ideology, that revolutionary and progressive nationalism has no reason, whether historical, economic or social, to turn into fascism.

#### Socialism through Democracy

We know two ways to establish a socialist system.

One is armed revolution under the leadership of workers, peasants, intellectuals and other working people; and the other is through parliamentary

wards, events moved swiftly. The general election in December, 1970 which gave Mujib's Awami League an unprecedented landslide victory was followed by Yahya's postponement of the session of the national parliament, the civil disobedience movement launched by the Sheikh, the abortive Sheikh-Yahya talks in Dhaka, the army crackdown, the arrest of the Sheikh and the war for liberation of Bangladesh.

BY ANY STANDARD, this is a remarkable political career which, through a quarter of a century, has been shaped by powerful events whose sequence believe the anticipation of even the main actors in the drama, including the Sheikh himself. The obvious distinguishing features of the Sheikh's career are his indomitable courage, his continuous reliance on his own mass support and his frequent use of agitational politics as an instrument to achieve his objectives.

#### Nationalist Leader

Right through the decade of the '60s, when Mujib's role was clearly that of an ardent revolutionary Bengali-nationalist leader, we see him dominating the Awami League and, through it, the entire political scene of what was then East Pakistan. But there were conflicting tendencies and contradictions within the man's personality, which were often clearly reflected in his political strategy. He was loved and almost adored by the masses and he tried his best to play the role of a democratically elected leader of a political party, fighting for democracy in the country. But he himself had become a domineering personality and had grown markedly impatient of criticisms and a little disdainful of the so-called committee decisions and all forms of collective leadership. Whenever there were conflicts between the Awami League and other political parties, Mujib, already a national figure, was completely partisan and often ruthless in denouncing those who opposed his organisation. Yet, he developed a power base of his own, especially among young students in the universities, quite independent of the influence of the party. In this sense, he attached much greater importance to personal loyalty which he undoubtedly enjoyed from his followers — and friends who did not even belong to the Awami League — than to old-fashioned ideas about party discipline or democratic cohesiveness within the organisation.

From February, 1969, on-

democracy. Because of the ill-wind of communalism in Bangladesh, no class-based organisation or class-struggle has successfully emerged. The threat posed by communalism against even ordinary democratic movements was a dangerous one.

In such a situation, instead of class-struggle, what emerged was a national revolutionary party, the Awami League, which cut across class barriers and which enjoyed the active support of the peasants, workers, intellectuals and other working people and classes.

After the eradication of landlordism, feudalism is no longer very strong in this country.

What we now have are the left-overs of feudalism — petty landlords, money-lenders and their bureaucrat-touts. It will be possible to get rid of them through the legal process.

On the other hand, the Awami League has blocked the path of expansion of the bourgeois class and capitalism by nationalising banking, insurance, large and heavy industry and a large chunk of commerce and trade.

They don't have the strength or power to launch an armed struggle against the government. The people of this country have enough power to resist the oppressor class.

Socialism cannot happen overnight — it is a long-term process. We have to move peacefully and slowly. We have to advance step by step.

There has been enough bloodshed, no more. Now, through parliamentary democracy and peaceful means, we want to take the country towards unity, progress and socialism.

For this, I believe power does not grow out of the barrel of a gun; people are the source of power.

It can of course be argued that if Sheikh Mujib had run the organisation or followed a political strategy strictly according to conventions, there would have been no Bangladesh now and East Pakistan would still be fighting with Islamabad for its rights.

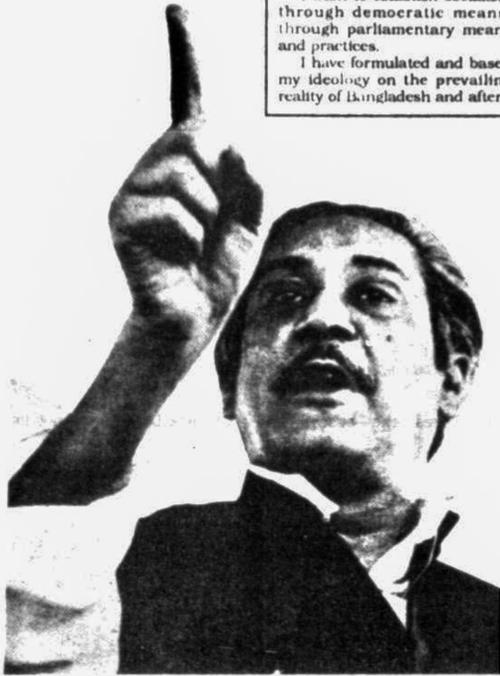
Over the years, Sheikh Mujib mellowed a great deal, perhaps more as a man than as a politician. As one of his close associates says, after all these years in prison, he now so obviously enjoys being back with his family. Once he was a rather strict father to his five children; now he is kind, considerate and even gentle.

To people who know him well, even Mujib, the politician is no longer quite the same. He is still the determined, tough leader who fought his way from one crisis to another, but he no longer has that touch of arrogance with his party colleagues once found rather disconcerting. In private conversations, he still makes scathing criticisms against his political adversaries, but few find him vindictive, and fewer still think that he will take executive action to silence his critics, unless he is badly provoked or dangerously misled by some of his extremist associates.

A former Awami League leader, Shah Azizur Rahman who allegedly supported the army rule was arrested by the Bangladesh police soon after liberation. His wife came to see the Sheikh to plead for her husband. Mujib said plainly that the law should take its own course. Then, taking his private secretary completely by surprise, the Sheikh ordered that Shah Azizur Rahman's wife be paid 500 taka (approximately US \$ 65) every month from the Prime Minister's Special Fund for the family's living expenses. "Until when?" the Secretary asked in bewilderment. "Well, until the case against Shah Azizur Rahman has been settled by the court one way or the other," the Sheikh replied and made it clear that he wanted no further discussion on the subject.

FOR WRITING A good 'copy', my last meeting with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which took place in Dhaka, in the first week of October, was somewhat unproductive. I was on my way to Hongkong after a visit to London and had arrived in Dhaka just when Mujib had begun the clean-up operation.

(Continued on page nine)



The Incomparable Mujib

An official biographical sketch of the Sheikh, released by the Bangladesh Government, sums up his performance in these words: "After the creation of Pakistan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman came over to Dhaka (from Calcutta) and enrolled himself as a law student at the Dhaka University. He was arrested on March 11, 1948, when the Language Movement started. He actively supported a strike by the University's mental workers and was sent to jail in March, 1949. On his release he found that he had been expelled from the University. That was the end of his university education. He set out on a turbulent political career and waged a relentless crusade against social, economic and political injustice. He spent eleven years of his life in Pakistan prisons but did not compromise with his principles."

#### Mass Support

While the leftist student leaders who had shunned him in the early '40s quietly disappeared from the scene — some had gone underground, a few had changed their views and some had quit politics — Sheikh Mujib slowly built up his mass support established his own credentials as a leader who was not afraid to go to jail and developed a keen awareness of the smouldering sense of revolt among his people. The only other leader who was doing exactly the same was Maulana Bhashani who, as the President of Awami League, was the Sheikh's party chief from 1949 to 1957. Mujib called him Huzur (master), while Bhashani often referred to the Sheikh as 'my son.'

However, if any politician was Mujib's guru, he was not Bhashani, but Shahid Suhrawardy. When Suhrawardy had formed the Awami League in 1949 with himself as its President, he made Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, then no more than a firebrand student leader, his Joint Secretary. From then, the two worked

very closely and understood each other completely. Suhrawardy valued Mujib's tremendous organising skill, his boundless energy and unqualified devotion to the party; Mujib admired everything about Suhrawardy, his political acumen, his sharp intellect and even his domineering personality. The two also needed each other. Mujib needed an all-Pakistan personality as his mentor, while Suhrawardy could not do without someone like Mujib to help him build up his mass support among the Bengalis. The two retained their close relationship right until 1963 when Suhrawardy, in his early sixties, died a frustrated man in Beirut.

The influence that Suhrawardy exercised on Mujib was one of moderation; some would also attribute the Sheikh's distrust of communalism to the political teachings of this one-time Prime Minister of Pakistan. No wonder when the Awami League split over the pro-American foreign policy of Suhrawardy, the Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1957, the Sheikh supported Suhrawardy and opposed Bhashani who quit the presidency of the organisation to form the National Awami Party.

Suhrawardy also introduced Mujib to the art of constitutional politics and thus exercised a softening influence on his ardent Bengali revolutionary comrade. To quote again from the official biographical sketch, "In 1954, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was elected to the East Bengal Provincial Assembly and became the Minister-in-charge of Cooperative and Agricultural Credit in the cabinet of Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Huq of the time. But the Fazlul Huq cabinet was short-lived as the West Pakistani ruling clique, afraid of the popularity of the new Government, dismissed it.... In June, 1955, Sheikh Mujib was elected to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan. In 1956, when Awami League government was formed (in East Pakistan), he joined the Cabinet as Minister-



Sheikh Mujib (right) with mentor Hossain Suhrawardy