

The Black Night

In the dead of night, like so many cowards, a splinter group from our armed forces killed the founder of the State of Bangladesh, along with all the members of his family except Sheikh Hasina and her sister, Sheikh Rehana on this very day, some 19 years ago. The nation's head hung in shame. It shocked us to discover that there were some among us who could have perpetrated this vicious act against a man to whom we owe so much. It took us some more years to start speaking out boldly against what happened on that dark night. Last year, under the leadership of our former editor, late S.M. Ali, this paper decided to editorially endorse the demand that this day be declared a national mourning day. To the best of our knowledge, we were the only one to do so.

This year also we raise the same demand and urge upon the government of Khaleda Zia to so declare, and give the honour and respect that is due to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the Founder of the State of Bangladesh. This we urge upon this democratic government, not as a favour to the memory of that great leader, nor as a concession to largest opposition party, but more as act of clearing our conscience for having done so little, for so long, for the man but for whom, who knows where our independence struggle would have been.

Regardless of our evaluation of Sheikh Mujib's government, we must rise above all partisan politics, in condemning what is obviously an act against the most fundamental of all rights — Right to Life. Have we become so blunted in our sensibilities, so utterly partisan in our view of events, so perverted in our sense of right and wrong, so oblivious of truth and falsehood, so indifferent to lawful and unlawful acts, that we cannot call the killing of Sheikh Mujib to be nothing more than a murder, and hunt down these murderers, and as any murderer should be. The Indemnity Ordinance that prevents us from prosecuting the well known killers of Bangabandhu is a travesty of the legal system. It stands as an epitome of the success of brute force and of those who believe that 'the source of all power lies in the barrel of the gun'. It shows that one can be as brutal, as murderous, as illegal and as violent as is necessary to achieve one's goal — the only thing to ensure is to be successful in capturing political power. For, once that is done, it can then be used to legitimize anything, including the universally recognised crime of murder — in fact mass murder at that. Let us not confuse the instances of political assassination that have occurred in other countries and in other times. There were a total of 18 people killed that night in at least three separate locations. Are we to understand that all of them, including the 12 year old son of Bangabandhu, the pregnant wife of Sheikh Moni, or the two newly wed wives of Sheikh Kamal and Sheikh Jamal, falls under that category. More non-political people were killed that night than politicians. And all this is covered by a blanket law that prevents us from taking legal action against any of the murders that occurred that night.

As we had stated last year, we think that 15 August should be declared a National Mourning Day, and that it should be observed at the state and government level with due solemnity and respect. Time has come to work towards reconciliation and reduce the issues that divide us. The respect and love that Bangabandhu enjoys among the people of Bangladesh can become an unifying factor for us. It must be understood and Sheikh Mujib is no longer a partisan figure but a national one. He belongs to history and to no one group. And it is in that spirit that first democratic government, after the fall of autocracy, should honour the man who led us in our struggle for independence, and helped us to get a country for ourselves.

Let this Truce Hold

Whoever thought this was ever possible? But youth has in it that perennial power of springing ever new surprises. And if the ways of youth may well be unpredictable for individual events, overall their idealism and spirit of sacrifice-tinged unmistakably and quite desirably too with romanticism-spurs the wagon of civilisation and society towards fairer days of order and security, realisation of man's eternal quests and ideals. These are the words with which we attempt to celebrate the Saturday bon homnye extraordinaire that overtook a terrorised and perhaps traumatised Dhaka University campus. Lest this sentiment of hope and enthusiasm should slide into unmeaning platitudes and inanities, we hurry to say that the observation applies specially to the achievements made by the youth of the historical Bengal, starting from Khudiram and Pritilata and coming down to Noor Hussain via the great Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — and not to the history of mankind in general.

Having welcomed the unprecedented event at the historic restaurant of Madhu-Da in which leaders of warring student parties met and mingled exchanging lotuses and the sworn enemies treating each other with sweets, we cannot but wish in all earnestness, together with the whole of the nation, that the truce arrived at there works and stays. We as a nation have never been wanting in our wishes. The question that now remains is how to realise this particular wish.

The unsavoury goings-on in this university over so many years tempts one to agree with those who from high perches of power and authority harp on the centuries-old adage urging the pupils to keep their pursuit confined exclusively to academic studies. But this position is tantamount to disowning the truth of the student achievements made for this nation as a whole as also rejecting the pivotal role the students still very much have to play in putting the nation on an even keel and inflecting it with a fair modicum of elan and dynamism. We, therefore, are all for students involving themselves in politics. But for God's sake, not as tools for some self-seeking individuals or groups or pseudo-ideological fascist gangs.

The problem with the university students' moral and active section the two decades has basically been that these young people have relentlessly been abdicating their position in the national scene and role in carving the nation's destiny.

We hope with all the optimism one can command in such frustrating times, that student power will very soon find its true role and address the challenges of national weal as a whole and not fragment and confuse and terrorise it as it has been doing lately. The Madhur Canteen truce must work and stay. As for the arms stashed in not-to-secret holds, let those be made liabilities rather than assets through a healthy return to wholesome politics by students.

NINETEEN years ago — in 1975 — on this very day, the founder of the State of Bangladesh, the supreme leader of our Liberation War, the man who helped us to overcome our small and petty bickering and unite behind the demands of political and economic emancipation, was brutally murdered. Along with him, his wife, his three sons, newly wed wives of the two elder ones, and many other members of his family were also mercilessly gunned down. The only two immediate family members to survive that massacre are his two daughters — Sheikh Hasina (currently the AL chief and the Leader of the Opposition) and Sheikh Rehana.

The events of that fateful night remain in the memory of this nation as the most tragic and sorrowful turn of events. It remains as a black spot in the collective psyche of our people, and works as a tremendous source of shame and guilt, which we get over by avoiding to face these unpalatable facts.

There are two ways of reacting to the events of the night of the massacre. One reaction can be that of an admirer. Of one who loved Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, adored him for his patriotism, looked upon him with awe, for his indomitable courage, held him in the highest of esteem for his nearly a decade and a half of political imprisonment, thought the world of him because of his single-minded pursuit of the cause of our people, and had the deepest of respect for the role that Sheikh Mujib played in uniting the people, and turning that unity into a massive and determined movement in the face of which a powerful and ruthless military leadership

had to fall. In the eyes of the admiring and adoring multitude, the killing of Sheikh Mujib is a crime against the people of Bangladesh; a crime against the state of Bangladesh; a crime against our Liberation War, against the values, principles and ideals of our independence struggle. A crime which, if not redressed, will haunt our conscience. But then these are the sentiments of the people who loved and adored him. This, as I have said, is one reaction.

The other reaction can be from people who do not have such emotional ties with what Bangabandhu did for us. This group does not think that highly of Bangabandhu, and in fact holds him responsible for the intellectual and moral decline of the Awami League during the post-liberation period. They find his decision to form BKSAL as the most treacherous betrayal of democracy, his closing down of all newspapers, except four, as the most severe assault on the freedom of the press, and his succumbing to sycophancy, and the gradual shutting out, from his immediate circle, of his more independent minded colleagues, as sure signs of his intrinsic undemocratic character. For all this they have a very critical view of the Founder of the State of Bangladesh.

All these points are worthy of note, and should form an integral part of any honest evaluation of Sheikh Mujib. I agree with these criticisms, but I see them as fatal flaws of a great historical figure — flaws for which he has suffered terribly.

However, where I fundamentally differ with these crit-

The Murder of a Patriot

by Mahfuz Anam

ies is when they see only his faults, and refuse to take a total view of the man, who for the first time in history, led us to create an independent state of our own. This one fact itself has earned many leaders of other nations the place of highest honour. In our case also, it should earn Bangabandhu the highest of laurels in our national life.

The fact that Bangabandhu's admirers will find the events of August 15, 1975 as highly condemnable is only natural. But how should Mujib's critics view the mass murder that took place on 15 August 1975? That is the question I would like to address today.

I think a fundamental mistake is made when Bangabandhu's critics fail to distinguish between a judgement on the performance of Sheikh Mujib, and a JUDGEMENT ON HIS MURDER AND THE MURDER OF ALL THE OTHERS WHO WERE KILLED WITH HIM. Let us follow the logic of Mujib's detractors. They hate him because he, according to this group, subverted democracy, betrayed people's trust, and gagged the press. So it is their love for democracy that makes them hate Mujib. My question, therefore, is, shouldn't that same 'love' make them hate Mujib's killers all the more? If Bangabandhu's assassination is glossed over as a political act, and as such justified, then what about the murder of other members of his family? If the killing of others at Bangabandhu's residence is glossed over as accidental, because they got caught in the cross fire, then what about the

killing of Sheikh Moni along with his whole family which took place in another house? What about the killing of Abdur Rab Serniabat along with his family, which also took place at a location far removed from where Sheikh Mujib lived? If it is democratic values and attachment for freedom of press that makes Mujib so unacceptable, then those same values should make the brutal, inhuman and ignominious acts of the early morning of August 15, the most shameful and hated event in our lives.

We do not have to admire Sheikh Mujib to be able to condemn, in the most vehement of terms, his murder. Our religion teaches that the right to 'life or death' belongs to the Almighty, and to Him alone. The most fundamental right that our civilization guarantees, is the right to live. The legal system says that even the most vicious of criminals must be given justice through the due process of law.

Even his bitterest critics eulogise Bangabandhu for his role during the Pakistani period for fighting for the economic, political and cultural rights of our people. However grudgingly, they also admit that Mujib was the supreme leader of our Liberation War. With varying degrees of dissent, all admire Mujib's role in unifying us and making an otherwise divisive polity into a powerful and determined force. Everybody acknowledges his leadership in all movements that dealt with the rights of the people of East Pakistan. First as the pupil of Moulana Bhashani and then of Shahid Suhrawardy, and sub-

sequently as his own person. Bangabandhu was always with the people throughout the period of struggle against the military and autocratic Pakistani rule.

It is Bangabandhu's role as the head of the post-independence government of Bangladesh which is controversial. Here again there are superb instances of statesmanship as evidenced in the earlier than scheduled withdrawal of Indian troops, getting the highest share of Ganges water compared to what any subsequent government could get, and in persuading the disparate groups of freedom fighters to lay down their arms. Bangabandhu's supreme achievement, in my mind, was the liberal, democratic and visionary Constitution that he gave the nation within a year of our independence — a Constitution which, I must regretfully hasten to add, later he himself literally destroyed.

The point I am making is very simple. We do not have to love Sheikh Mujib to condemn his assassination. We do not have to endorse his one-party rule, or the gagging of the press, to demand that his killers be punished. Those people who feel that Sheikh Mujib needed to be removed from political power, should not confuse the 'end' with the 'means'. In their hatred for Mujib and in their desire to justify his fall from power, his detractors are closing their eyes against the violation of all the norms of Constitutional governance and the legal process of transfer of power or change of government. And in so doing, setting the most dangerous of precedents. They are making constitutional and

democratic governments vulnerable to the boundless ambitions of unscrupulous and power hungry charlatans. By not making any distinction between their desire to see the fall of Mujib government, and the brutal and murderous nature in which it came about, these people are ending up endorsing a heinous crime which is antithetical to the most fundamental grain of our values, approached from any angle of democracy, tradition, religion, constitutionalism, legal treaties, and national or international norms.

I strongly feel that the mass murder of Bangabandhu and his family is a national shame, and a fundamental source of much of the illegality, unconstitutional developments and political violence that we saw following Sheikh Mujib's killing. Regardless of our feelings for him, our hatred for murder, killing, violent toppling of elected governments, the arbitrary grabbing of political power and violation of Constitutional provisions, should take higher place. We must vehemently and wholeheartedly condemn the acts perpetrated on 15 August.

Whatever may have been our initial reaction, today, with the restoration of democracy, the upholding of the democratic principles must find proper expression in our conduct of state affairs. In this regard I sincerely hope the government of Begum Khaleda Zia will work for the removal of this national blemish, and for the punishment of the killers of Bangabandhu, and for giving the Founder of our State his rightful place of honour and respect in our national life. Bangabandhu is no longer a partisan figure. He belongs to us all, and to history. And that is how this government should view him.

Reflections on 15 August 1975

by Shah A M S Kibria

The present government is committed to repeal the Indemnity Act which bars the trial of those who perpetrated the heinous crime. Can we really have rule of law in the country if killers are allowed to roam freely under the protection of law which negates the fundamental principles of justice?

an independent and sovereign Bangladesh is Sheikh Mujib's greatest monument.

The conspirators did not spare any effort to tarnish the memory of the Father of the Nation. They created a ridiculous controversy over the call for independence. Their aim was to diminish the importance and significance of the role played by him in the liberation of Bangladesh. Such pathetic efforts were bound to fail. The people fully realize that the declaration of independence is not the result of a sudden and impulsive decision by an individual. It is the outcome of a collective decision of the whole nation. The urge for independence was felt in million hearts and only then they got themselves united, organized and mobilized for the Liberation War. They prepared themselves for making the supreme sacrifice to achieve their goal. Who is the person who ignited this spark of freedom in their hearts? Can there be any difference of opinion on the answer to this question? Indeed it was Sheikh Mujib in whose mind the idea of an independent Bangladesh was first born. He had the charismatic personality to imbue the entire nation with his vision of a Bangladesh which will be independent and sovereign. In fact he articulated the inner feelings and thoughts of the whole nation. When on 7 March 1971 he declared to the million-strong sea of humanity assembled in the Race Course maidan that the struggle this time was one of liberation and independence, he

actually gave voice to the innermost wish of the nation. Indeed while delivering his historic speech on that day he truly embodied in himself the soul of the nation.

In those days in 1971 I used to live in Washington as a diplomat. Even there Bangabandhu's clarion call had reached us. In fact, his call was heard by every patriotic Bengali throughout the world. Almost to a man they responded. A vigorous movement was launched in support of the Liberation struggle in every country around the world where even a very small Bengali community lived. Leaving aside the comforts and privileges of the diplomatic life I and all my Bengali colleagues in the Washington Embassy joined the struggle. When I recall the stirring events of those days I now feel that from 7 March onwards we had all become, in our thoughts and deeds, humble soldiers for independent Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib. These days when I come across some of the arrogant and often mischievous remarks by some rehabilitated collaborators masquerading in patriotic garb I feel that they do not realize that their efforts

to distort history are not only contemptible, but that such attempts also betray an abysmal ignorance about the harsh and unerring judgement of history. One is justified in questioning the judgement and honesty of those who claim that one fine day an army major stood up on an off drum and declared independence. The fact that an unknown major in the army read out a statement on the radio on behalf of the supreme leader of the Liberation War does not make any difference to the true history of our Liberation War. Deliberate attempts to re-write history with an ulterior motive cannot erase what is engraved in the memory of the people of this country about the towering individual who stood for their rights even at the risk of his life. In the end he gave his life for his country but as I said at the outset history etches out its course relentlessly, and all the attempts of scheming men to falsify the records of history will be washed away in time.

Admirers of Bangabandhu express their love and respect for him by referring to the many sterling qualities of his head and heart. I like to stress his contributions as the great leader of our struggle for inde-

pendence. Bangladesh has, no doubt, produced other great men. We have had leaders with outstanding personalities. Indeed some of them make important contributions to the nation. But it was Sheikh Mujib who had the vision of an independent state, who clearly set the goal before the nation, who led the long and often bitter and bloody struggle for independence and who ultimately emerged victorious. His remarkable success in uniting the nation at a critical point in our history is an achievement whose importance can be hardly exaggerated. Nirod C Chowdhury, an Indian author, characterized the Bengalis as a self-destructive people. Intermine quarrels and bickering, according to Chowdhury, are inherent in Bengali character. Bangabandhu proved him wrong. Of course the Jamaat and other communal parties as well as some leftist parties went all out in 1970-71 to mislead and divide the nation along communal or ideological lines but the masses stood, like a rock behind Bangabandhu and gave him a resounding vote of confidence. It was the unprecedented victory of the Awami League party in the election which provided the nation with the unity of purpose and leadership. Such unity in the face of the enemy's savage assault as well as the machinations of its allies was possible due to the charismatic personality of Sheikh Mujib.

The anti-Liberation forces have not given up their sinister designs to create rifts in the

nation. They are today busy whipping up religious and communal sentiments to divide the nation and weaken its fabric. Collaborators, rehabilitated in the post-75 period, are openly demanding the alteration of the fundamental principles on which the state was founded. Taking off their mask they now dare to question the patriotism of our freedom-fighters. Some of them, in high positions, refuse to play the national anthem. The reactionary elements are still not content; they want to turn Bangladesh into a theocratic state. At this critical juncture all the patriotic people must rededicate themselves to forge national unity as they did in 1970-71 under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib. His life is an inspiring lesson for those who wish to serve the nation and uphold the spirit of the Liberation War.

One cannot conclude an article on the tragedy of 15th August without referring to the question of the trial of his killers. The present government is committed to repeal the Indemnity Act which bars the trial of those who perpetrated the heinous crime. Can we really have rule of law in the country if killers are allowed to roam freely under the protection of law which negates the fundamental principles of justice? One hopes that the myopic policy of those who have blocked the trial all these years will change and the nation will rid itself of the guilty feeling that seems to haunt our national politics.

Unless the BNP government has any special reason to protect the killers one cannot find any reasonable ground for their failure to act on this issue.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Unethical

Sir, The other day, I happened to visit a local bank to deposit an International Money Order in my account. I took my seat in a chair in front of the lady assistant of the bank dealing such cases. Since I had no Deposit Form, I left my seat just for a moment to get the requisite form. Meanwhile a youngster occupied the chair on which I was sitting. Apparently, when I came back, I found the seat occupied by the youngster who knew it well that I left the seat. I am an elderly person, aged 71 years, but the youngster didn't have the courtesy to offer me the seat. He didn't budge an inch. Bad manner indeed! Having no more vacant seats, I had to stand by the side of the youngster for quite some time before I could get through.

As a sharp contrast to this scenario, it reminded me, in a flashback, when I was in London in 1964/65 and working in a factory as a machine operator. I had to attend my duties and come back home by travelling in the tube. Quite often, I observed youngsters offering their seats to the aged persons, irrespective of colour. I was then 41/42 years old, but

youngsters would offer me their seats, if I was standing by holding the straps. The youths were well versed in courteous manners; social, ethical, humanitarian and moral values, irrespective of their or others' colour. In this context, I would like to invite comments on the subject by the learned readers. While I was a student in Calcutta, I had to travel by trams quite often. I would offer my seat to any elderly person.

N H Sufi
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Power failure in Narayanganj

Sir, Narayanganj, the Dundee of the East, has been suffering from frequent power failure for months. It has become a very normal phenomenon for the dwellers of this vast town with a bulging population to bear the brunt of a 'powerless situation' day and night. The electricity rather plays a hide-and-seek game from afternoon till midnight. The authorities does not care at all, it seems, for the dwellers. There is, however, little protests from the rich and VIPs. We don't know why.

In the pre-liberation period people knew how to complain

against and protest public inconvenience but we now appear to have forgotten the art. We only know how to complain against an individual or political party. We are to be practical, realistic and finally, democratic.

Fayezur Rahman
Narayanganj

Railway fare

Sir, It has been observed that many of the seats in intercity trains flying between Dhaka and Chittagong are going vacant not only in first class but also in 'shovan' class. This is because, of late, many good quality airconditioned bus services have been introduced in the route who charge fare slightly more than the 'shovan' class but offer much better service and also reach the destination earlier. They even offer attractive snacks to the passengers. Hence Railway is increasingly losing passengers to this category of buses.

Hence Railway authorities should make an analysis that if they cut down fare of the 'shovan' class what will be the likely increase in the number of passengers and what will be its impact on revenue earning? If it is found that reduction in fare will attract more passengers and also result in higher amount of revenue, Railway authorities should not hesitate to go for it.

While the bus service is improving, railway service is deteriorating. Although accidents are quite frequent in road

journey, still passengers are preferring it because of better service. Of late snacks that used to be offered to first class Railway passengers has been discontinued in Dhaka-Chittagong route. But buses continue to offer it including cold drinks. Will the Railway authorities ponder over this?

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka.

Neither Prokrichi nor BCS (Admn)

Sir, The engineers, agriculturists, doctors and the members of the non-administrative cadre in a meeting held in Dhaka recently have rightly demanded that the DCs and TNOs should not head different development committees such as Fisheries Development Committee and Livestock Development Committee etc. They have also demanded of the government to empower the departmental officials to head such committees.

We feel that since Bangladesh is a People's Republic and we have a democratic government, neither the bureaucrats of BCS (Admn) nor the Prokrichi officials should be allowed to head any development committee and to preside over coordination meetings at district and thana levels.

On the contrary, constitutionally and democratically we strongly feel that each and every district and thana should have a chief people's representative to be known as zila

proadhan' and thana proadhan respectively who may be elected on the direct vote of the people of the area. They should head all the development committees and preside over the coordination meeting at the district and union levels ensuring people's participation in the development works, accountability and smooth administration in the country.

Would our public leaders, bureaucrats BCS (Admn) and Prokrichi kindly let us know their opinion on the matter?

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Tasleema Nasreen and Blasphemy Law

Sir, The international media is very happily circulating around the world the demands of some small militant Islamic groups in Bangladesh to introduce a Blasphemy Law in Bangladesh, similar to one already in existence in Pakistan. The international media also is very fond of the demands of the same groups for the death penalty for the writer Ms Tasleema Nasreen.

As a Swiss converted to Islam (nearly 35 years ago) I may be permitted to express my views on the two issues. Regarding Ms Tasleema Nasreen — she seems to be just a very silly lady. The less said about her the better. Why even repeat her name? Allah will deal with her as He, in His infinite wisdom will see fit.

Regarding the call for a 'blasphemy law' After studying

the Holy Quran for the past 35 years I still find Islam absolutely logical. To put it briefly (as it is necessary in a letter to the editor) punishment is required in this life for crimes against the society but for crimes against Allah, the Holy Quran leaves punishment upto Allah.

Sura Al-Nisa reads in this respect: "Those who believe, then disbelieve, then again believe, then disbelieve, and then increase in disbelief, Allah will never forgive them nor will He guide them to the way." First of all no "death penalty" for disbelief can be taken from this verse. How can anyone "then again believe", if he/she is killed after disbelieving the first time? Moreover, it is clearly stated that we can leave the punishment upto Allah, for it is "Allah will never forgive them". Nowhere does it state that some Mullahs should take any action whatsoever.

So, for the love of Islam, let this letter be the last one to even mention the name of Ms Tasleema Nasreen (.. the less said the better..) and for the love of Islam, let Allah be the judge of any disbelievers and let us not waste our energy on things like asking for Blasphemy Laws, which will please only the enemies of Islam.

Haji Mohammad Rafiq Ahmad
Tschannen,
P O Box 36, Latkrabang
Bangkok 10520