

REMEMBERING BANGABANDHU

March 1971 and the Emergence of Bangladesh

by Rehman Sobhan

To the best of my knowledge in contemporary history no leader of a movement and this includes such epic figures as Mahatma Gandhi, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Nkrumah, Soekarno and Fidel Castro, ever exercised such total political authority over a people and country without directly capturing state power.

TODAY Bangladeshis as a nation should be commemorating the birth of our founding father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. His life and definitive role in the creation of Bangladesh should be the centre piece of our media and the President and Prime Minister, along with the rest of the nation should take the lead in celebrating this event. Instead our TV will be preoccupied with the World Cup final in Lahore and the day will pass with observances organised by the Awami League and some cultural organisations committed to the memory of Bangabandhu. For 20 years, official Bangladesh has continued to shame us as a nation by officially disowning our own paternity. This dishonour to our nation's history, appears to rankle more sharply particularly in the month of March, this year on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of Bangladesh's emergence as an independent nation. It is this murder of history which has, as much as anything, contributed to the divisions in our nation and accentuated bitterness to the point where we cannot readily resolve our political conflicts. If a nation cannot agree on its heroes, can it be expected to reach a consensus on its current political conflicts?

March 1971 was the month when Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign nation and March 7th was its defining moment. On March 26th, we went through the formality of announcing our independence where several individuals were, by historical circumstance, accorded the privilege of reciting this historical pronouncement in the name of Bangabandhu. However on 7th March, Bangabandhu, in his historic address at the Dhaka Race Course, before an audience of a million frantic Bangladeshis, took the people of Bangladesh across the dividing line between a political movement for regional autonomy and into a life and death struggle for nationhood.

Between the 1st of March, when Yahya postponed the National Assembly session in Dhaka, up to 7th March, Bangladesh witnessed a non-cooperation movement of historic proportions. Nothing moved, no office functioned. The Government of East Pakistan simply ceased to function because every serving official, by choice, decided to abstain from work in response to Bangabandhu's call. However it was still the Government of Pakistan which exercised authority in Bangladesh and attempted to enforce it under the authority of the Chief Martial Law Administrator, Lieut. General Sahibzada Yakub Ali Khan. This authority was used to enforce curfew and deploy troops which inevitably led to considerable bloodshed because the Bengalis openly defied these curfews. Yakub, who had already advised Yahya, along with Governor Ahsan, in a historic meeting in Islamabad at the end of February 1971, not to postpone the assembly session, had concluded by the 4th of March that military force could not contain the movement and had withdrawn his troops into their barracks. Thus by 7th March, the writ of the state of Pakistan had effectively ceased to run outside the cantonments of Bangladesh.

On 7th March, Bangabandhu effectively took over power in Bangladesh and established self-rule for the people of Bangladesh for the first time since the Battle of Plassey.

Between 7th March and 26th March, Bangladesh was administered under the authority of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the basis of the authority vested in him by the people of Bangladesh in the election of December 1970. He commanded no formal authority, he held no title, except that of Bangabandhu but his writ ran in every village and town of Bangladesh to an extent that no government, before or since, has managed to establish in these parts. In this period the machinery of the government which exercised authority in Bangladesh in the name of the Government of Pakistan, formally transferred its allegiance to Bangabandhu. The Civil Servants organised themselves and under the leadership of Sanaul Haq, one of the senior-most serving Bengali officers, called on Bangabandhu at his residence in Road 32, Dhanmondi to pledge the support of the bureaucracy to him. In the same way other civilian agencies of government whether in the judiciary, police force or public corporations, one after the other, pledged their allegiance to Bangabandhu.

The official sector was soon followed by the private sector where the various chambers of commerce and industry, each rushed to pledge their allegiance to Bangabandhu's authority. The trade unions took the lead in not only pledging to continue work in the production centres but committed themselves to enforce Bangabandhu's decrees to see that their non-Bengali owners did not attempt to sabotage his dictates. Soon the leaders of other political parties, defeated in the December, 1970 election by the Awami League, joined the procession to Road No 32 to pledge their support to Bangabandhu. Whatever may have been their private views, publicly most of these leaders, many of whom went on to collaborate with Yahya Khan after the crackdown of 26 March were, at that time, publicly seen to come forward to proclaim their support to Bangabandhu.

What was remarkable about these declarations of allegiance was that they were, of necessity, made to a person, Bangabandhu, because there was, at that time, no structure of governance in place in the shape of a shadow government backed by a working parliament. Thus all authority was personalised in Bangabandhu and then delegated by him to Tajuddin Ahmed, Kamal Hossain and others from the party leadership who were most directly associated with running the administration. Indirectly, lesser actors such as some of us economists, held office in the Dhanmondi residence of Prof Nurul Islam to apply our amateur minds to the complex issues of working out provisional directives to re-establish the functioning of the economy. In the same way party functionaries at the central, district and local level, began exercising authority over local administration in order to establish law and order, attend to local problems such as distribution of foodgrain rations, fertiliser, diesel and operation of power pumps to keep the inputs flowing for the Boro crop. It may be an impression, tinged by the romanticism of hindsight but at that time Bangladesh probably experienced less crime and corruption and elicited more spontaneous effort from workers and employees than has since been the case.

With this transfer of allegiance from all elements of official and civil society, Bangabandhu effectively took over the exercise of civil power in Bangladesh. What began as a movement of non-cooperation



thus graduated to a phase of people's raj, where civil society that than officials ran a government under the leadership of an individual without formal authority. Those who talk of civil society today, without knowing what it served, should look to Bangladesh in March 1971 to see civil functioning in all its majesty.

To the best of my knowledge in contemporary history no leader of a movement and this includes such epic figures as Mahatma Gandhi, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Nkrumah, Soekarno and Fidel Castro, ever exercised such total political authority over a people and country without directly capturing state power. I do not know of an occasion where all echelons of both civil government and civil society have withdrawn their authority from a ruling government and pledged it to an individual who was not in command of state power. Nor do I know of any occasion where all nationals serving in the armed force of the ruling or occupying power, spontaneously mutinied and pledged their allegiance to a leader in rebellion against the established government.

This mass mutiny, which on 26 March, 1971, turned serving soldiers into a vanguard for a liberation army, was only possible because of the total mobilisation of the Bengali nation behind a leader who had, with his party, the Awami League, been overwhelmingly elected by the people of Bangladesh to realise their demand for self government. Bangabandhu and his party thus commanded a representative status which was almost unique in the history of electoral politics. However in March 1971 Bangabandhu rose above his party and was transformed by history into the role of father of the nation. In that month of March 1971, perhaps for the

first and last time in the history of the Bengalis, one man, in his person, captured the spirit of the nation and thereby united an entire people behind him. As we have noted earlier, this included all political opinion, the machinery of administration, the armed forces and every element of civil society from the businessmen to his workers, from professionals to poor peasants, many of whom were thereby inspired to spontaneously pledge the lives to the Liberation War, which commenced on 26th March 1971.

This glorious epic of March 1971 defined our existence as a nation before the world and transformed what would have been a restoration of legitimate authority by the Junta of Yahya Khan into a war of aggression against a sovereign people, leading on to the commission of genocide by the Pakistani army on the Bengali nation. It is to our shame as a nation that this glorious chapter in our history and the person who symbolised our unity as a nation, have for the last 20 years remained outside the recognition of successive governments and their controlled media. Not content with the crime of parricide, which was then legitimised in our constitution over whose defense so much blood has been spent in these last few months, we have also invented the crime of historical revisionism. To erase the image of Bangabandhu from official memory we have had to erase history. Can we hope that in this our 25th year as a nation, history may again be restored as a recognised discipline, to be taught to the present generation of Bangladeshis who barely remember what March 1971 was all about and little of the man who represented the spirit of this epic moment? Let us not forget that, those who do not remember history are condemned to relive it.

Historic 7th March 1971: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the then Race Course ground making the clarion call "Ebarer sangram muktir sangram..."

Sheikh Mujib - the Legendary Hero

by Prof Roushan Ara Hoque

TODAY is the 76th birth anniversary of the great legendary hero Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder-father and the architect of Bangladesh. On the eve of the Silver Jubilee of our independence, naturally, we should observe with due solemnity the birthday of that towering personality whose lifelong struggle led the nation to that culminating point when his clarion call to take up arms on 7th March '71 and the declaration of independence on the night of 25th-26th March inspired the whole nation to dedicate their lives in the Liberation War for their motherland. It is undeniable that had there been no Mujib in our history, no Bangladesh would have been born and we would not have become the citizens of an independent state.

Born in Tungipara, Gopalganj in 1920 under British imperialistic rule, Sheikh Mujib was imbued with patriotic feeling from early life to serve his country and fight for its independence. In 1940 he joined the All India Muslim Students' Front and within one year he was elected as the Councillor of Bengal Students' Front. In 1943 he became a Councillor of Muslim League. While doing graduation in Calcutta Islamia College he became the General Secretary of the Students' Union. In 1948 he was enrolled as a Law student in the University of Dhaka. He vehemently protested against the declaration by Khawaja Najimuddin of

Urdu as the only state language of the then Pakistan. At his initiative an All-Party Rastrabhasa Sangram Parishad was formed on 2nd March and at called a general strike on 11th March '48. While leading a procession under 144 he was arrested but was released on public and students' demand. He was again arrested on 19th March while organising a strike of the fourth class employees of the DU and as he refused to sign a bond of obedience to government he was expelled from the University. While leaving the campus he promised to come back to the DU but 'not as a student'. After long 24 years his prediction proved to be true as he entered into the same, first as life member of the Senate and then as a Chancellor.

Since 1948 Sheikh Mujib played an active role in the Language Movement and was imprisoned in 1950 for about two years. While in jail he condemned the inhuman killing of the students on 21st Feb. '52 and continued a hunger strike for 17 days for his own release. In 1953 he was elected as General Secretary of the then Awami Muslim League. In October the name of which was changed to Awami League. In 1954 Awami League won 143 of the 227 seats won by the United Front. Sheikh Mujib became the Co-operative and Agricultural Minister when he was only 34 years old. After the imposition of rule 92A he was again arrested. In 1955 he was re-elected a member of the Legislative Assembly and



demanding provincial autonomy on the basis of those demands. At the outright rejection of those demands he came back to Dhaka on 14th March. On 25th March Yahya Khan took over power and declared Martial Law and took steps to suppress all the public movements. In the general election of 7 December '70 Awami League won 167 out of 169 seats of the province in the National Assembly and 305 out of 310 seats of the East Pakistan Assembly. The leader of the Pakistan People's Party agreed to form a coalition government in the centre with Awami League. Sheikh Mujib was elected Leader of the Parliamentary Party. On 28th February '71 Bhutto came to Dhaka to have a discussion with Sheikh Mujib. At the failure of which after three days Bhutto returned to West Pakistan. President Yahya convened first session of the National Assembly on 3rd March at Dhaka. Bhutto boycotted the session and demanded the handing over of power to the two majority parties of the two provinces to form two provincial governments. On 1st March Yahya suspended the National Assembly session for indefinite period. Mass agitation broke out. Sheikh Mujib called general strike on 2nd March and demanded to hand over power to him immediately. Then he called for non-cooperation movement against the government which was a great success as the entire nation was behind him. Then on 7th March he delivered his most important clarion call to all his countrymen to build resistance against the imperialistic rulers. His strong voice is still reverberating in the horizon.

He became the Minister for Industry, Labour, Anti-Corruption and Village-Aid. But in protest against the bureaucracy of Pakistan he resigned from his Ministry and began to reorganise the Party. In 1958 when Martial Law was imposed Sheikh Mujib was again arrested. Ayub Khan tried to control him by bringing many cases against him but in vain. He was released in 1959 and was put under house arrest for two years. On 6th February 1962 Sheikh Mujib was again arrested under the Public Safety Act and was released again after the withdrawal of Martial Law. Then he went to Lahore and formed National Democratic Front under the leadership of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy with whom he toured throughout East Pakistan to mobilise public opinion in its favour. In 1965 he was again arrested on charges of treachery and for giving objectionable speech but was released after one year. Sheikh Mujib placed his historical Six Point Programme before the National Conference of the combined opposition parties held in Lahore on 5th February '66. It was the Magna Carta of the movement towards independence. On 1st March '66 Sheikh Mujib was elected as President of Awami League. To mobilise public opinion in favour of his Six Point Programme he made a political

mass-meeting tour throughout the length and breadth of East Pakistan. During his tour he was arrested several times for delivering anti-state speeches but was released on public demand as all the people were supporting his Six Point. By this time Sheikh Mujib became the national leader of

the people rather their saviour from the oppression and exploitation of the West Pakistani rulers. So to remove him for good from their way the Pakistani rulers implicated Sheikh Mujib along with 35 others in the so-called 'Agartala Conspiracy Case' on the plea that they were engaged in a conspiracy to detach East Pakistan from West Pakistan. He was arrested on 17th January from jail gate after being released from one earlier case. He was taken to the Cantonment and the trial began under high security and secrecy but the whole country strongly protested against the case. All the students started mass movement and after strong agitation Pakistan Government was compelled to release Sheikh Mujib along with all others unconditionally on 22 February '69. At the initiative of the Central Students Sangram Parishad a grand reception was arranged in the then Race Course ground. About one million people attending the reception and honoured Sheikh Mujib with the title 'Bangabandhu' which was a befitting recognition for his sincerity and love for his countrymen. He had also supported the 1 point programme of the students. In the Round Table Conference held at Rawalpindi on 26 February '69 Sheikh Mujib placed the Six and Eleven Point Programmes and

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