

HOMAGE TO SHAHEED PRESIDENT ZIAUR RAHMAN ON HIS 64TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY



Ziaur Rahman : A Tribute to A Martyr

-By Prof. M. Maniruzzaman Miah

Ziaur Rahman's appearance on the stage of Bangladesh politics can be compared with that of a comet in the Firmament. His appearance was sudden and unexpected as was his lamentable disappearance. He appeared for the first time on the political scene when on 26 March 1971, he declared the independence of Bangladesh. Syed Ali Ahsan, who was at that time professor at the University of Chittagong has given a graphic description of the events that took place in Chittagong on 25 and 26 March in some of his writings. He has related how excited he was when he heard Ziaur Rahman declaring the independence of Bangladesh on 26 March. Tears of Joy rolled down the eyes of his wife, he wrote.

At that time Zia was a little known young army officer, a major, at the Chittagong Cantonment. After the talks between Yahya Khan, the then President of Pakistan and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Awami League chief, for political accommodation broke down, the Pakistan Army pounced upon the civilian population on 25 March. The people not having had any political direction from any quarter whatsoever were in a fix. On the other hand, the whole country was a tinder-box, so to say, after a monthlong political movement of the extreme kind. It needed only a spark to kindle the fire. Ziaur Rahman's declaration provided this. The entire population rose in revolt and after a 9-month-long sanguinary war the country won freedom. Modest and unassuming, Ziaur Rahman then receded into the background. He re-appeared on the centre-stage of Bangladesh politics again on 7 November 1975. This was however a fortuitous event. He was not there by choice or by design. But once he was catapulted to the office of the key person in the government, he made his mark as a man of vision, foresight and ability. With all these qualities in him, combined with his altruism and patriotism, he was able to give a new direction to the country's politics.

His achievements in the country's politics were manifold. First, Ziaur Rahman's idea on nationalism. For him, no nation can achieve greatness unless it is imbued with a sense of nationalism. He repudiated the philosophy of Bangladeshi nationalism, as distinct from Bengalee nationalism. Bengalee nationalism is based either on race or on language. If it is based on a racial concept, the people of races other than the Bengalees would find it difficult to identify themselves with it. And therefore it is inappropriate to our situation. If it is a language-based nationalism, it won't work either, for Bengali-speaking people are spread also beyond our territorial limit. And therefore this cannot give us the sense of unity without which we cannot develop ourselves as an economic unit and thus preserve our independence and sovereignty from the onslaught of neo-colonialism, expansionism and cultural imperialism. Zia's nationalism is not based on religion either for various reasons. True, majority of the country's population are Muslims. But there are millions of Muslims all over the world. Therefore the idea of a religion-based nationalism won't work either. Moreover, people of various religious communities have been living in Bangladesh in complete peace and harmony for centuries and therefore there is no reason why they cannot think themselves as one unified national personality. Over and above, nationalism based on religion could not prevent the exploitation of one part of Pakistan by another which finally led to the break-up of the country. In simple terms, his Bangladeshi nationalism transcends racial, linguistic and religious bounds but is limited by geography which evolved over the centuries and is now bequeathed to us as Bangladesh. History and geography have given us this personality called Bangladeshi nationalism.

But nationalism, albeit essential for unifying a people, is not enough. It will be meaningless to a hungry people. Unless we are able to satisfy our people's basic needs, no philosophy will work. One unique trait in Ziaur Rahman's character was that he devoted a lot of time to understand the country's problems and thought of solutions thereof. A 19-Point programme for the economic emancipation of the people was one such formulation by him. The major thrust of this programme was to ensure food, clothing, shelter, education and health for the people. It envisaged ameliorating the lot of the common man, of the workers and peasants and also of government employees. BNP's manifesto did embody a detailed programme and how to implement it. He quite correctly stressed on the need for rural development. He diagnosed that in a predominantly agrarian economy the villages should be the basic unit of development. Extending his perception further he gave priority to water-development, wherefrom his canal-digging programme. The charisma of his leadership was such that in rural areas where people kill each other for one cubit of land, the village folk surrendered their land, to their dear President Zia, besides their voluntary labour. And he was able to excavate more than 1000 derelict rivers and canals without any expenditure from the public exchequer. Ziaur Rahman's hard work, combined with his love for the common man and his vision bore fruit. Food production increased, so was industrial production. The shattered economy of the early 70's was brought on an even keel.

While his success at the home front in matters of maintaining law and order, in bringing discipline in all spheres of our national life, particularly in governance, in putting the economy back on the wheels was spectacular, his achievements in foreign affairs was no less. In foreign policy, his main plank was maximising the country's interest without bartering the country's sovereignty. During Ziaur Rahman's time



Zia - A Visionary Leader

-By Reazuddin Ahmed

martial law on November 7 when Zia was installed to power by the people and the soldiers through a revolution. Seventh November was the turning point in our national life. The country was set on a long march towards democracy. The so-called democrats and elected representative of the people killed democracy and established one party Baksal rule. Is it not true that multi-party democracy was killed through establishment of Baksal? Is it also not true that the multi-party democracy was restored by Ziaur Rahman? What the critics will call Zia- a killer of democracy or a savior of democracy? It is true that Zia was a soldier. A soldier's image in most third world countries is that he takes position against democracy. But there are exceptions. Zia was such an exception. It was Ziaur Rahman who allowed political parties to function under multi-party democracy. The 1979 parliament was represented by different political parties. The noted parliamentarians were elected to that house.

President Zia emerged as a politician through formation of a nationalist front. Such a front was then required to organise the nationalist forces. The nationalist forces were then fragmented and scattered all over the country. Zia saw tremendous political potential in that force. So he formed the nationalist front to bring all nationalists under one banner. The front was then converted into Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Formation of BNP was a significant event in our political history. The launching of BNP was a deterrent to those who wanted to rule Bangladesh perpetually with extraneous support. Ziaur Rahman launched BNP to create a balance of power in our society. As a politician Zia felt the urgency of forming a party that could nurture and protect democracy. BNP did it when General Ershad was trying to perpetuate autocratic rule in Bangladesh. If a politician's success lies in seeing things beyond his nose, then Zia was definitely a successful politician because he filled the vacuum in our political arena by launching a strong party that is needed for sustenance of democracy.

President Zia will be remembered for so many reasons. He restored discipline in the administration and charted a road map for Bangladesh to make the country a self-reliant one. He took over the administration at a time when Bangladesh was a bottomless basket. But Ziaur Rahman within shortest possible time, pulled up Bangladesh from the shambles. The nation not a

Bangladesh played a prominent role at the OIC, becoming a member of its most prestigious Al-Quds committee. He himself was a key-factor in the negotiations between Iran and Iraq. He also struck up a personal relationship with a large number of prominent African leaders. It was during Zia's time that Bangladesh was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Bringing relations on a correct track with all the neighbours was the crowning glory of President Zia's foreign policy. He was successful not only in improving our bilateral relations with the neighbours but could make them agree to rally under the umbrella of SAARC forgetting their petty differences. On the bilateral plane, he was able to iron out some of the differences which we had with India, our biggest neighbour. It was during his Presidency that the Indo-Bangladesh 5-year Ganges water sharing agreement was signed removing at least for the time being a long standing dispute between the two countries. As per terms of the agreement, a minimum flow was guaranteed to Bangladesh, a necessary condition for a lower riparian, and there was no scope for any tendentious interpretation of any provisions of the agreement. These aspects differentiate the agreement from the one signed in 1996 which does neither guarantee a minimum flow throughout the dry season, nor are some of the terms free from an undisputed interpretation. All in all, the country's image brightened up both at home and abroad.

Before we conclude, we have to recapitulate the very special circumstances prevailing in the country when Ziaur Rahman had to take over the reign of government. A few months earlier, during Awami League rule, the country's constitution was changed to make way for a one-party government. Publication of all newspapers was prohibited except 4 government-controlled ones. There was a coup-d-etat and martial law was proclaimed by a former colleague of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman namely, Khondker Mostaque Ahmed. And there was another coup-d-etat on 3 November with the installation in office of a new President who dissolved the parliament. Over and above there was a complete breakdown of authority in the army where there was a large number of killings of officers, their wives and others.

After his providential coming to guide the country's politics, Ziaur Rahman quickly brought order out of chaos in the army and discipline in the administration. He also worked through a programme of gradually reverting the country to a multiparty democratic system, held elections to a new parliament and presidency by adult suffrage and freed the press from the yoke of official interference. Their fundamental rights having been restored, people heaved a sigh of relief. There was freshness in the air which one could feel.

To-day Ziaur Rahman is no more. When he was alive he stood for a cause, that of consolidating the integrity and sovereignty of the country and of freeing the masses from the dirt and squalor of poverty. To that end, he worked incessantly during the short span of the time he was at the helm of affairs. Of late, one finds that there is an attempt, both overt and covert, to sully his image. But history will bear testimony to his achievements.

On this day when the people's much-beloved President Ziaur Rahman is no more we remember him in great reverence for everything that he did and stood for and pray to the Almighty that He in His infinite mercy may grant his soul peace.

dignified position in the committee of nation as a member of security council and vice-Chairman of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC). Zia undertook initiative to make the country self-reliant in food and his action plan was so successful that Bangladesh could export rice in early 80s. The country's industrial policy was liberalised and private sector was given the driving seat in industrial development of the country. During his time denationalisation process started. It is needless to say that Bangladesh had to suffer most because of wholesale nationalisation at the dawn of independence. He streamlined administration through sweeping measures. The talented people were attracted to the civil service through competitive examination.

In foreign policy Zia scored many successes. A new born country under his leadership played significant role in establishing peace in middle east. Bangladesh was a member of Al-Quds committee and Zia was given the pioneering role to end war between Iran and Iraq. Bangladesh's victory in the security council election was a great honour and recognition of this country's role in establishing world peace. He will be remembered for his initiative to bring all the countries of South Asia under the umbrella of a regional organisation which later became the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Zia was a visionary. He saw the potential in such an organisation for promoting peace and development in this part of the world. Zia took the initiative to form a south Asian regional organization during the difficult time of cold war. In the post cold war era regional groupings are mushrooming across the world. But Zia dreamt of such an organization at a time when no one in South Asia saw the possibility of bringing the seven countries together because of their acrimonious relations. Even Zia was misunderstood for taking this move. But he was undaunted in implementing his dream. Today SAARC is a potential organisation and this regional grouping can play a vital role in promoting regional peace, harmony and economic development.

Zia had firm conviction in institutionalising democracy and the society. He took certain steps that will be remembered for long. The newspapers enjoyed freedom during his time. He took initiative to set-up press institute of Bangladesh and formed press council. He took all these steps to strengthen democracy and institutionalise freedom. Zia introduced a brand of politics that enthused younger generation to participate in nation building activities. A frustrated people saw silverlining in the clouds under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman.

ZIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN QUEST OF A REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ROLE FOR BANGLADESH IN A HARMONY OF VISION AND PRAGMATISM

By M. M. Rezaul Karim

The immediate post-Mujib or a of Bangladesh witnessed a gradual but marked departure from the application of initial foreign policy objectives. It was evident that while Sheikh Mujib's basic principle of foreign policy was friendship with all countries and malice towards none, it was, in fact, heavily tilted towards and almost became an adjunct to the policy pursued by what was known as the Indo-Soviet axis. Following the events of 15th August 1975, relations of this axis with the new regime of Bangladesh were notably vitiated by a perceptible degree of mutual distrust and misgiving. Zia's foreign policy, therefore, was somewhat modified to express-friendship with all countries on the basis of sovereign equality and, in view of the overwhelming Muslim population in the country, emphasized on the need for making special efforts to promote friendship with Muslim countries.

During this volatile period the ascendancy to effective power by General Ziaur Rahman, the then Chief of Army Staff, though gradual, was clear and destined in a government which was composed almost, as a body, of the assassinated President's own friends and Party (Awami League) stalwarts. On account of its unique geo-political situation, foreign policy of Bangladesh has always been guided, in a significant manner, by considerations of its relationship with India, the great neighbour, which, besides other aspects, geographically surrounds Bangladesh from almost all sides. India's annoyance on the new regime in Bangladesh found expression in a continuing squeeze on the release of Ganges waters for Bangladesh below Farakka. Zia then sought new and dependable friends in the region and in the international community.

Ziaur Rahman's major initial thrust in foreign policy was thus made as sequel to a situation created by these developments in its relations with India in the water sector. Zia first went to the Organization of the Islamic Conference session and placed the issue. He got all the sympathy one could get, but no redress. He then went to the non-aligned summit in Colombo, which also extended support to Bangladesh's cause but had no effective means to rectify the situation. Finally, Zia wrote to the UN Secretary General and decided to raise the issue formally at the United Nations. Fortunately, the Congress government of Indira Gandhi yielded power to the Janata government of Morarji Desai, who took a pragmatic decision and concluded in 1977 a five-year interim agreement with Bangladesh on the sharing of Ganges waters between the two countries. Zia's subsequent visit to India then became productive.

The somewhat normalization of relations between Bangladesh and India was, however, short-lived. It ended with the departure of Janata government and advent to power of the Congress(J) of Indira Gandhi in India. The latter's deep-seated and prolonged friendship with the first Awami League government of Bangladesh continued to make the new Bangladeshi regime a suspect. The relations relapsed to coolness, though Zia sought to pursue a correct policy.

Zia's vision and pragmatism in foreign policy then came to play in full force. He started with the neighbours. He realized that India factor held the key to the promotion of mutual relations among countries of South Asia. Bitter relations between India and Pakistan posed a formidable barrier to fostering understanding, friendship and co-operation among the neighbouring countries. The issue was complex and protracted negotiations could not produce a positive outcome. As a result, countries of South Asia were not able to avail of the enormous individual and collective benefits and advantages that could accrue through mutual co-operation in a vast range of unexplored and undisputed fields. Zia was determined to take initiative and worked towards this end. The success story of the hitherto garrulous ASEAN states provided him added

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inspiration. Zia's vision was then transformed in the eventual formation of the institutional framework of SAARC-a forum of all the 7 countries of the region wherein their people could reap material benefits through mutual consultations in undisputed subjects and sectors. With the realization of his bold and decisive initiative, Zia's dream came true. The concept and initiative for the creation of SAARC, registered the highest water mark in Ziaur Rahman's successful foreign policy in the region.

Zia's success in planing Bangladesh in firm footing in the comity of nations was also no mean achievement. Although a number of countries in the Middle East had already recognized Bangladesh, the real opening up of Bangladesh co-operative relations with the oil rich Arab countries took place during Zia's time, with the recognition of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent nation by the leading nation in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia. Zia's commendable role OIC conference earned him a prestigious seat in the coveted Al-Quds Committee, which was headed by the King of Morocco and was entrusted with the task of liberation of Jerusalem with its Dome of the Rock mosque and the first Kibla of Islam. The fact that he was chosen to undertake a shuttle diplomacy to resolve the fratricidal war between Iraq and Iran was a glowing testimony to his capability as a skilled negotiator in the Muslim World and a befitting recognition of his commendable personal diplomacy in international arena.

Besides the Arab world, Zia became instrumental in establishing firm and productive relations with both the USA and the West in far right and China in the far left. This was also reflected in his domestic policy of his choice of Prime Ministers subsequently from reputedly pro-Chinese Mashur Rahman and pro-West Shah Azizur Rahman. The West became generous in the formulation of its aid policy towards Bangladesh. China provided, among others, the much needed military hardware, equipment and supplies whose traditional source from the erstwhile Soviet Union had dried up. Zia's success in gaining friends in both the international camps earned him his hitherto lacking trust and confidence in Bangladesh. Another shining example of his diplomatic achievement was the victory of Bangladesh over mighty Japan in a bitterly contested election to a well-earned seat in the Security Council.

Zia's reputation in both personal diplomacy and individual honesty, which is almost a rare phenomenon especially in the developing world, was well known and won him international recognition. I had the privilege of arranging maiden State visits of President Zia and Begum Zia in Sri Lanka and China in 1979 and 1980 where I was serving as High Commissioner and ambassador respectively. Earlier, General Zia, as Deputy Chief Martial Law Ambassador, paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia soon after I had opened our Embassy there as Minister, Charge d' Affaires in January 1976. Even in New Delhi during my assignment as deputy High Commissioner in 1977 and a part of 1978, Zia paid at least 3 official visits to India. During all these State and official visits, the host government and people of the receiving states were impressed by Zia's discernible attributes of simplicity in nature, straightforwardness in action and, above all, integrity in personal and financial matters. His reputation as a statesman of international stature and his sterling quality of personal honesty spread far and wide. Zia's tragic and untimely death not only proved an irreparable loss to the nation, but deprived his people accelerated progress at home and greater glory abroad.