



Special Supplement on the 65th Birth Anniversary of Martyr President Ziaur Rahman

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Zia-A VISIONARY LEADER

By Reazuddin Ahmed

Ziaur Rahman : As I knew him

M.M. Rezaul Karim

My first meeting with Ziaur Rahman was in early 1966 in Abbotabad. He was a young Major working as an instructor in the Pakistan Military Academy at Kakul. There were two other smart and promising Majors from the then East Pakistan, also instructors, in the prestigious Academy. One of them was Khaled Mosharraf, who much later as the Chief of General Staff staged a short-lived coup d'etat on the 3rd November 1975 and was killed after the coup was aborted on the 7th. The other instructor was my brother in law, M.A. Mannaf, who also rose to the position of a Major General and became President Ziaur Rahman's Chief of General Staff. I have gone to Abbotabad on a furlough primarily to visit Mannaf and his family from New York where I was then posted as a diplomat. I also had the opportunity of meeting Begum Zia for the first time during that visit. Throughout talks then were mostly confined to general topics, the issue of utter neglect and deprivation of our people in the hands of the military rulers of Pakistan figured in it prominently. Reserved and well-composed as he was, Zia lent to more of his ears than used his tongue. This particular trait of his character was retained for long till after he assumed Presidency. I noticed a streak of sadness in his face while discussing the plight of the people of our region.

The next time I met him it was in London soon after Liberation. I was then acting as Head of the Bangladesh Mission there. Our talks this time were highly political and centered largely on the glorious episodes of the liberation war. The narration of his reminiscences of the war was most absorbing. It made the audience spellbound and took them to the bygone days of uncertainty and danger. Our freedom fighters had been haphazardly recruited, inadequately trained but were deployed, in guerrilla warfare, against a formidable and well-trained fighting force equipped with much superior and sophisticated arms, equipment and military hardware. Zia's observation of the high morale of the freedom fighters and low stock of weapons and supplies during the final stage of the war made one brood the possible consequences had the liberation war dragged on for a longer period. He inquired from me about the war items, which the Sector Commanders had asked for and requests for which were subsequently sent to our unofficial Mission in London for procurement. These were meant to supplement the existing items supplied to our freedom fighters. He was happy to note the progress of the work, as two plane-loads of clandestine arms shipments were being arranged for dispatch under the guidance of the late Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury whose Deputy I was. But the execution of the plan was aborted with our liberation victory on 16 December 1971.

Only the other day I was delightfully surprised to come across in my dossiers some of the original lists supplied by the Sector Commanders. The third period of our encounters, which Urdu should be the only state language of the country. Maulana Bhasani was the first political leader who voiced the sentiment of the Bengalee people who constituted the majority of the population of Pakistan. The mass movement of 1969, which brought down the despotic regime of Ayub Khan was also spearheaded by the undaunted Maulana who along with thousands of agitators marched towards Dhaka Cantonment and in the face of mass upsurge the Government released Sheikh Mujib who was implicated in the Agartala conspiracy case. On the fateful night of March 25, 1971 Sheikh Mujib courted arrest leaving behind the helpless unarmed people to fight uncertainty and was flown to West Pakistan. The political leadership vacuum thus created was promptly filled by a mid-level Bengalee army officer, Major Ziaur Rahman who demonstrated his courage and wisdom by taking up the daunting challenge of proclaiming independence of Bangladesh on March 26, which gave the broken nation a moral boost, a sense of direction and helped them unite to wage war against the occupation army. Zia thus performed a historical role at the most critical time of the nation as De Gaulle, than an army colonel, had done in 1940 during the Second World War by issuing a clarion call to the demoralised French people to raise a war of resistance against the Fascist aggression. At that critical juncture, the people of Bangladesh heard the voice of Zia, not Sheikh Mujib who was supposed to play the historical role. Zia thus rose from obscurity to prominence and became a national hero.

took place intermittently, was from 1973 to 1975 while Zia was Deputy Chief of Army Staff and I was a Director General in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although we met off and on we hardly visited each others home despite standing invitation from both sides. His off-repeated invitation contained a literary expression in Bengali, quite a rare phenomenon with him 'for you my doors are always open.' We used to meet occasionally in the flat of the renowned litterateur and Director of the Shishu Academy, the late Zobeda Khanom. One could not but notice Zia's characteristic reservation running into a stony silence whenever some one broached the subject of the injustice done to him by way of depriving him of his legitimate office as the first Chief of Army Staff following liberation.

One important event that deserves recounting took place on the glorious Day of Revolution and Solidarity on 7th November 1975. On this day the valiant men-in-arms and courageous citizens joined together in a quiet revolution and free General Zia from his forced detention in the cantonment by leaders of an abortive coup. In the early hours of the morning of the 7th I received a phone call from the General freed from his captivity. Zia asked me to inform Heads of Diplomatic Mission in Dhaka not to be concerned about the sound of firing and shouting of people. He said these were nothing but spontaneous outbursts of joy and expressions of happiness by soldiers and the public who had unitedly staged a successful revolution.

He particularly asked me to inform the Indian High Commissioner, Samar Sen to assure him of the policy of friendship of Bangladesh with India and to develop our relations on the basis of 'the most favoured nation' principle. I politely intervened by saying he had meant the principle of 'good neighbourly relations'. He quipped, 'you diplomats know what to say'. Zia's directives were meticulously carried out at daybreak with the help of my colleagues in the Foreign Office. This particular message conveyed to the Indian Envoy clearly indicated the policy professed by Zia towards India at that time. People think such attitude helped him to conclude the first Interim Agreement on the Sharing of Ganges Waters with India and to bring India within the fold of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation.

The Subsequent contacts I had with General Zia were in Saudi Arabia in 1977. Soon after I opened the Embassy in Jeddah. Zia paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia. Although he was designated as Deputy Chief Martial Law Administration, the Saudi Government accorded to him high respect and protocol befitting a Head of Government. The General took the opportunity of apprising King Khaled, Crown Prince Fahd, Defence Minister Prince Sultan, Foreign Minister Prince Faisal and other leading personalities about the rationale for the creation of Bangladesh as a sovereign, independent nation. He destroyed the myth and the notion prevalent in Saudi Arabia that Bangladesh had been created by a Hindu India to destroy a Muslim Pakistan. During that visit Zia laid foundation Saudi Bangladesh economic co-operation and initiated the flow of movement of labour and professionals from Bangladesh to the Holy Land. Then came the period from 1977 to 1978 while I was posted as Deputy High Commissioner in New Delhi. The Interim Agreement on the Sharing of Waters of the Ganges and his noble initiative towards establishment of the SAARC to forge regional co-operation in South Asia made him pay visits to New Delhi a number of times. These occasions permitted me to work closely with him as the Head of Government and later as Head of State. He aptly demonstrated vision, sincerity of purpose, skill and courage to convince others and straight forwardness in approach that help him win over others, including adversaries. His dogged perseverance and megalomaniac efforts made him attain his desired objectives. During my visits to Bangladesh he often called me and used to talk to me, in his words, as a friend on both domestic and international matters. He was deeply concerned about the urgent need for controlling population growth and for augmenting food production. I must admit of my initial inhibition at his entering politics. But later realized that by floating a popular political party he, in effect, served the cause of democracy by evolving, almost unwittingly, a two party political system. His state visit to Sri Lanka in 1979 while I was High Commissioner there was a stupendous success. Sri Lankan government and people were full of admiration of President Zia for assuming bold leadership of South Asia being the architect of the SAARC and also for his commitment of democracy.

me, but politely informed him that my two children would then be deprived of education as an English medium school existed in China till that epoch. The President sat silently for some time and then told me, I have two sons whom I hardly see. When I leave for work in the morning, they are sleeping; when I finish my work and return home at night, they are already fast asleep. Such sacrifice one has to do for the country and the people'. The next month I left for Beijing. His third and the last state visit that were arranged by me was that to China in 1980. Our relationship with China already reached a lofty height. Despite to great transition taking place at that time from the old guard under Mao Ze Dong to the reformist camp of Teng Hsiao ping, the pomp and grandeur of the red carpet reception accorded to President Zia signified a memorable event in China. A number of bilateral agreements end compassing varied fields were signed during the visit. These further strengthened the bond of friendship between our two countries. During informal talks following the state banquet hosted by the Chinese at the Great Hall of the people the President spoke of the delicate political situation in the country. He whispered to say that while praying at the sunrise he sought blessings of the Almighty that He allows him to see the sunset. These brief remarks spoke volumes. Then Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang was to pay a return visit to Bangladesh. The date was fixed for sometime in the first week of June. About two days before we lost him, he telephoned me at Beijing and inquired whether everything about Zhao ziyang scheduled visit to Bangladesh was going on according to plans. After I assured him fully, he said that every minutes detail of the proposed visit was being personally looked into by him at his end. These were his last words with me. In the fateful morning of the 30th May I was informed on phone by the Reuters correspondent in Beijing of the cruel assassination of our dear leader, I almost froze. It was so sudden, so unexpected and so incredulous. A luminary fell from the sky and was lost forever. The nation lost a noble soul, the people a dynamic leader, the region a visionary and the world a statesman. He is missed by all, who are committed to democracy and development. Zia's death justified the adage that one can really value a person only after he is gone.

accommodate all ethnic groups and unify the divided nation. Zia's Bangladesh Nationalism offered a common platform to those nationalist forces who were looking for an alternative to Mujib's Bangladesh Nationalism, which is, by all definitions, based on erroneous concept, particularly when Bangladesh has become independent, as it has failed to protect all ethnic identities within the territorial boundary of the country hold their nationalist sentiments. President Zia as proponent of Bangladesh Nationalism eventually floated Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) which brought together all the nationalist forces from all political currents, mostly from the followers of Maulana Bhasani. Zia as its supreme leader gave it a liberal doctrinal shape of a liberal democratic party having its ideological strength from Bangladeshi Nationalism. He launched his party with the unique slogan 'politics for development' clearly aimed at involving all forces, the youth force in particular, in the uplift activities and forge national consensus on the development issues. Since the birth of Bangladesh, Zia emerged as the only leader who saw the national building task from a global perspective and kept a watchful eye on progress in all fields-political, economic, social and cultural, because he believed a nation without developments in all the sectors could not sustain the competitive age and hence its sovereign existence. He built infrastructure for economic development, but never left the cultural front unattended. Let us cite two instances. Jamuna

Bridge, the monumental achievement, and never been a dream of Sheikh Mujib nor Ziaur Rahman. It was a long-standing demand of the people of north Bengal from the pre-partition days. But it is Zia who first actively considered and worked on the plan for construction of Jamuna bridge in view of its importance for economic development. His unfinished task was mostly done by his successor Begum Khaleda Zia, though it has been named, to our utter shame, after Bangabandhu. That we today take pride in the performance of our cricket team who have enhanced the image of Bangladesh abroad is the sole contribution of Zia who set up the Cricket Board to encourage the game among our boys. Most of the Biggest installations like fertilizer factory, electricity plant, etc were either initiated or established during his time. He revived Dhaka Stock Exchange and allowed the garment industry in the private sector pioneered by late Nurul Kader Khan, he also initiated move to attract foreign investors in exploration and extraction of gas and oil knowing full well about the potential reserves. In addition to his reform programme, President Zia's dynamic foreign policy and statesmanly acumen earned Bangladesh name and fame in the world community and brought him the recognition as the emerging leader of the Third World as well as the Muslim world. Thus Zia will be evaluated in the history as the architect of modern Bangladesh and in this context he can only match great reformist leader Mahathir Mohammed of today's Malaysia.

introduction of a multi-party democracy in Bangladesh and his personal at quality of being free from corruption, a rare attribute for leaders of the developing world were highly commended. He told me before his departure from Colombo that he would like me to go to China as Ambassador. Our relations with China as the new and major source of defence equipment and supplies following drying up of the traditional source, the Soviet Union, rendered our Embassy in China exceptionally important, he added. I reflected briefly and thanked the President for the honour done to

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Zia-architect of modern Bangladesh

by Amanullah Kabir

Had there been no independent Bangladesh, Zia would have been tried as a traitor and Sheikh Mujib's name would have been written in golden letters in history as saviour of Pakistan. However, Zia can again stand comparison with General De Gaulle who assumed state power when France plunged deep into political turmoil due to the pervasive destabilising factors as legacy of the World War. Zia also emerged as the helmsman by consensus through the unprecedented soldiers-people upsurge on November 7, 1975 when the war-ravaged country was drifting to a civil strife amidst military coups and counter coups. Military-turned-politician President Zia could read through his freedom fighter's eye the mind of the people who fought the bloody liberation war with a definite objective that could be achieved only by redeeming the past and fixing the priorities on the basis of an agenda. The people fought the nine-month-long war not for mere territorial sovereignty, one country-one party-one leader system and a bottomless basket as described by the than US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, but for political, economic and cultural emancipation which was impossible without recourse to radical change and drastic reforms. Zia dreamt of a modern Bangladesh and made others to

accommodate all ethnic groups and unify the divided nation. Zia's Bangladesh Nationalism offered a common platform to those nationalist forces who were looking for an alternative to Mujib's Bangladesh Nationalism, which is, by all definitions, based on erroneous concept, particularly when Bangladesh has become independent, as it has failed to protect all ethnic identities within the territorial boundary of the country hold their nationalist sentiments. President Zia as proponent of Bangladesh Nationalism eventually floated Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) which brought together all the nationalist forces from all political currents, mostly from the followers of Maulana Bhasani. Zia as its supreme leader gave it a liberal doctrinal shape of a liberal democratic party having its ideological strength from Bangladeshi Nationalism. He launched his party with the unique slogan 'politics for development' clearly aimed at involving all forces, the youth force in particular, in the uplift activities and forge national consensus on the development issues. Since the birth of Bangladesh, Zia emerged as the only leader who saw the national building task from a global perspective and kept a watchful eye on progress in all fields-political, economic, social and cultural, because he believed a nation without developments in all the sectors could not sustain the competitive age and hence its sovereign existence. He built infrastructure for economic development, but never left the cultural front unattended. Let us cite two instances. Jamuna

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The people across the world remember their heroes and pay their respect to those who served the nation with dedication. They follow their ideals and implement those for building the nation. The People who became the national heroes served the nation and the people selflessly. Such national heroes fought against the enemies of the nation to liberate and defend their motherland and built the nation with statesman like foresight. They planned the national development with vision and sagacity. People gain by remembering them and following their ideals. Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman was one such person who emerged as a liberation war hero in 1971 and later became a visionary in building a modern Bangladesh. But it is not very easy to evaluate Zia in short because his achievements are really great. He made remarkable contributions as a soldier, president, politician and as a reformer. Zia is often seen by many either as a soldier or as a president. This may not be the proper way of evaluating a national hero. Zia should be seen in totality for an objective evaluation of his life and achievements because his honesty, dedication, sagacity and foresight will continue to guide the nation and inspire the new generation.

Even the critics of Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman can not undermine his role in the liberation war and restoring peace and discipline in the country in the post '75 Bangladesh. When Zia came to the centre stage of power, the country was in total anarchy. There was no government in the first week of November, 1975. The whole nation was as helpless as it was on 25th of March, 1971. In 1971 Major Zia gave the nation a sense of direction and called for taking up arms to liberate the country. A determined people turned back at his call and defeated the occupation forces. It was Zia who fulfilled a soldier's obligation by liberating the country. Again General Zia stood by the people when the conspirators were trying to undermine country's sovereignty. Those who saw the anarchy in those days in 1975 will definitely agree that General Zia appeared as a savior of the nation. But I know there are many over romanticised people who will say that Zia's role has been exaggerated. But it is not true. I am to say that Zia has not been properly evaluated. Undermine the contribution of Zia, should not forget that a soldier's duty is to defend his motherland and Zia did it in 1971 and 1975.

In 1975 General Zia was brought to the center stage of power through a revolution. The people and soldiers jointly organised that revolution to defend country's sovereignty. Zia was brought to radio station from, captivity. He did not seize power by promulgating martial law. The country was already under 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 exceptions. 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 got a 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-Quads 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 too initiative to set-up press institute of Bangladesh and formed press council. He too all these steps to strengthen democracy and institutionalise freedom. Zia introduced brand of politics that enthuse younger generation to participate in nation building activities. A frustrated people saw silverlining in the cloud under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman.