

21st Anniversary of the Martyrdom of Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman-2002

Special Supplement

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 month long 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 propounded 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

Ziaur Rahman A Tribute to A Martyr

Prof. M. Maniruzzaman Miah

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, a 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 of 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 understanding 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 embodied a detailed programme and how to implement it.

He quite correctly stressed 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 pri-

ority 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 did industrial production. The shattered economy of the early 70's was brought to an even keel.

While his success on 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 its 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 Bangladesh played a prominent role in 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 a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Bringing relations on to the 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 longstanding 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 interpretations. All in all, the country's image brightened 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 the 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-état and martial law was proclaimed by a former colleague of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman namely, Khondker Mostaque Ahmed. And there was another coup-d-état on 3 November with the installation in office of a new president who dissolved the parliament. In addition, 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.

Today 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 with 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.

Shaheed Zia The Man of Vision and Success

Professor Dr. Yajuddin Ahmed

Man wanders in the world of dreams when s/he is lost in slumber or at the sub-conscious state. Some of the dreams are reflected in real life. But many of those dreams remain merely dreams and cannot even reach close to reality. There are a few great personalities who have made their dreams come true. Nelson Mandela is a glowing example of inspiration. He had a dream to fulfil the hopes and aspirations of 26 million South Africans. He waged a war to remove the curse of apartheid so that everybody irrespective of color could enjoy the democratic rights; and he was successful.

President De Gaulle refused the proposal to surrender to Germany during the World War II. Mao Tse Tung, the great leader, protected the independence and sovereignty of the People's Republic of China. Yasser Arafat, though he took the leadership of Palestine in 1988, has not yet his cherished goal achieved. President Castro dreamed of the independence of Cuba; and he attained success. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman dreamed of the independence of Bangladesh, but he could not realize his dream completely. He had tremendous support behind him to achieve the goal. The whole of the nation stood by him. But leaving behind millions of his people he surrendered to the brutal Pakistani forces. He had a plan but failed to reach the planned destination.

Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman was such a great man as to brave all the grave risks of life to declare his dream to the nation from Kalurghat Radio Station of Chittagong on March 26, 1971 at 2:15 a.m. He knew well about the impending danger to him and the members of his family. But he braved all the dangers and performed the role of an indomitable hero. He dreamed of rescuing the dying nation. He knew his effort to do that might push him into death. Millions of people might be comforted by grave life threatening danger. But he was firm and unflinching in his decision. He appropriately identified it as the right time which might not be available later. The people of then East Pakistan would be finished if they failed to attain independence now. They would have died for nothing. Therefore, he thought it wise to embrace death in the war for independence. So he read the Declaration of Independence from Kalurghat Radio Station. He gave a clarion call to the nation to prepare itself for independence. Had Zia not declared independence on that day, it would be difficult to say whether there would be any War of Independence or whether Bangladesh would at all attain independence. The people of Bangladesh on that day took up arms. They took a vow to equip themselves with such military training as to protect Bangladesh by defeating a strong foreign military force.

The brutal Pakistani forces launched their assault in different places including the University of Dhaka and killed many people indiscriminately. The teachers, who all along taught the students to stand against terrorism and feuds, fell victims to the attacks. Many of those teachers died one after another.

Many persons were hauled to the mass killing spot at Mirpur and killed brutally. The already blood soaked Bangladesh was flooded with the blood of 3 million people at that time. About 600 thousand of our mothers and sisters had to sacrifice their chastity and lives. In spite of these, Shaheed Zia did not lose his morale. He realised that the day's grave situation would only turn worse unless we took up arms and waged a war against the assaults.

The commander of Z-Force Major Zia fought heart and soul. He gave a call to the people to take up arms for the protection of the country. He knew no rest during the nine-month-long war. He had no shortage of self-confidence either. He fought relentlessly in order to make the Pakistani troops surrender. Zia won victory in his sector and kept watch on the situation in other sectors and dispensed necessary advice. Shaheed Zia as well assisted by the freedom fighters and the people from all walks of life reached the threshold of independence in the 9-month-long war. The red sun of Bangladesh rose on December 16, 1971 with the surrender of the Pakistani forces.

Shaheed Zia completed his vow and went back to the barracks. He shouldered the responsibility of Comilla Brigade as its Commander. The nation remembers with profound gratitude and respect the bravery and contribution of Shaheed Zia in our War of Independence and in the following days. We have watched the changes on August 15 of 1975. Sheikh Mujib was killed along with members of his family on that day. A few of his very close allies formed a government before his blood had dried. Those allies of Sheikh Mujib began to rule the country. Shaheed Zia became the Chief of

Army a few days later on the 25th August 1975. He encountered another crucial ordeal on November 7 that year. Brigadier Khaled Mosharraf, though himself a freedom fighter, made an attempt to divide the newly independent country. He stepped into the Indo-Soviet ploy and on November 3, 1975 took up the authority of the government and put Ziaur Rahman under house arrest. He also ousted President Khondker Mostaque and put him under arrest.

The troops and the people understood the design of Brigadier Khaled Mosharraf well and came out of their barracks and houses to protect the independence and sovereignty of the nation. Brig. Mosharraf was killed at the hands of agitated soldiers. They set Zia free. The release of Zia generated joy and enthusiasm among the people. The people did not want that the dream of Zia would go in vain. They did not want any failure of their ideal either. November 7, 1975 comes round to us every year as National Revolution and Solidarity Day. Had there been no November 7, we might have lost our hard-earned independence and the sovereignty resulting in loss of the existence of our country on the map of the world. Maybe, we would have to live the life of slaves. But there is no justification of that kind of life.



We had also seen the helplessness of Bangladesh before November 7, 1975. The country was plagued with famine, economic depression, autocracy etc. Baksal took away the people's right of speech. In a nutshell, the independent people of Bangladesh was not independent during the Baksal regime. The profession of journalists was meaningless. Almost all the newspapers were closed.

Shaheed Zia formed the government and injected enthusiasm into the moribund veins of the nation. The country began to thrive with a fresh hope once again. The economy of the country began to burgeon. People began to write and speak with full freedom. All the newspapers once again began to write freely. Multiparty democracy saw the light of day once again. The country was set in motion towards development with the 19-point programme. Tuition free education for women was introduced to increase the rate of literacy. Shaheed Zia loved children. He would cruise the rivers along with children with a view to enlightening the future generation of the country with lofty ideals. The identity of Bangladesh in the international arena was enriched by his effort. His contribution to SAARC and OIC is indisputably remarkable. Shaheed Zia was a President of Bangladesh but he had always been that without any crown. He used to move like the ordinary people and all the citizens of the country were equal to him. He was absolutely free from nepotism. He lived a simple life and put on very ordinary garb. These were many of the

remarkable aspects of his life.

The Verdant Bangladesh is like our mother. Its granary is based on fertile land and abundant water. But during the rule of the Awami League, the India-Bangladesh agreement for 25 years and the operation of the Farakka Barrage without any water treaty had begun to turn parts of Bangladesh into a desert. Shaheed Zia took up the canal-digging programme in order to overcome this situation. This canal-digging programme was turned into a national movement. Zia could realize well that abundant supply of water is a must for ensuring food for the 130 million people of the country. This wisdom motivated the nation in the canal-digging programme.

We were highly impressed by the personal attributes of Shaheed Zia. Teachers are the guides to a nation. He had the notion that teachers could make a generation of a country qualified and show the way to development. Therefore, Shaheed Zia would show respect to the teachers, and now and then come across them to exchange views and ideas. Once he had met the teachers and employees at the Teachers Students Centre (TSC) of Dhaka University, the objective of which was to see what we could achieve from the exchange of views. His arrival at the university was a significant day indeed. He would take decisions quickly for running the administration. Today's Ministry of Science and Technology is an outcome of his prompt decision. A few of us along with Professor Innas Ali went to him to speak about the importance of creating this Ministry. Shaheed Zia readily realised the importance of our proposal and issued an administrative order for its creation.

He had no personal demand and never cared for that as well. He had all the chance to become the President after the uprising of sepoy-janata on November 7, 1975. But he did not take advantage of that. He was directly elected President of the country through voting held in 1978. He is the creator of the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism. He believed in indigenous culture and education. He introduced the politics of development through the establishment of multiparty democracy instead of Baksal. The political parties were allowed to function without any restrictions. Even the Awami League which was ousted by the people from the seat of power, got the right to power anew. As a result, the Awami League formed the government after a period of 21 years through the general election held in 1996. Some may forgets this contribution of Zia, but the Awami League itself should not.

Shaheed President Zia left us for good in the night of the 29th May of 1981. He was killed brutally in Chittagong Circuit House on that fateful night in a military coup. The immeasurable love and respect of the people for this great leader were reflected in their spontaneous and emotional participation in his funeral. All the deaths are not deaths. This death has only stamped Zia permanently alive in the heart of the millions of people of Bangladesh.

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