



"But that I am forbid to tell....of my prison-house"

- Enayetullah Khan

When the Constitution (Fourth Amendment) Act, January 25, 1975 was passed at the speed of light, the one-party monolithic structure, and all the trappings that went with it, was only a matter of unblemished time. That did not happen post haste, though the nomenclature, (later chosen to be Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League, acronymed BKSAL or BAKSAL), the hierarchical structure and the principles and programmes were kept closely guarded.

Soon after the enactment of the Draconian one-party amendment, I received a surprise call at the National Press Club of which I was the President. The booming voice at the caller's end was that of the would-be one-party supremo, the late President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Addressing me by my nickname, he summoned me to the Ganobhaban in his usual hearty mien. As a dissident, who had weathered a closure of Holiday in 1973 blissfully for a few weeks only, after another one in 1971 in occupied Bangladesh, and the confiscation of all available published copies and the passport, as also the volley of calumnies in Parliament, the establishment media in Bangladesh, India and the unaligned ex-Soviet Union for Holiday's crusade against the sitting government and for civil liberties, I was quite awed by the call. But the purpose of the summons was not fully comprehensible to me.

No, it was neither a reprimand nor a big stick, but a strict, though, gentle command to help prepare the structure of a one-party media plan for relocating the extant staff of all but the four media mouthpieces of the State and the Party. The Second Revolution was already in motion. It needed as many apparatchiks as there would be bonded labour or conscripts. I reckoned I was lucky to fall in the latter category, and not find myself in the Gulag or the reform-camp or the gallows. And I felt somewhat reassured by the presence of the late Shahidul Huq, my senior and a collaborator of Holiday on the unconscionable job in company with the supremo's press secretary, Abdul Toab Khan, the leading light of Bangla journalism. The informal technical exercise was carried out skimpily. For the whole works, already over and done with after the ex-Soviet model, was perfunctory as also a ploy. The ex-Soviets, namely the Communist Party of Bangladesh and the NAP (Muzaffar), were about to win the day behind the tottering prop of an unloved regime and extend the hegemony of what was then the Indo-Soviet axis. But the second revolution was already becoming a painful drag. So I wrote in March 9,

already past since the loaded thunder of change (one-party) has waned into a languorous monotony. The big events have come and gone like routine festivals which weigh heavier than the joy they bring... The spectacle is devastatingly morbid. It nether stirs nor numbs. It holds you on a leash of suspended sentence...that has suddenly elongated into an unspecified time span of a second revolution. "Nothing possibly could be worse than what it is today. Only doom can beat it all. Hence optimism fights back in a pitch-dark tunnel of unworshipping politics that holds little light at the end of it. Or it may well be a blind tunnel with no way to go. We are just in the middle of it singly, collectively and as a nation." (Holiday, March 9, 1975, self).

The conscription by the omnipotent power was short-lived. With the one-party only a month away and the guillotine on the press hanging amid a total silence of the lambs, the I-am-the-state psychopathy was no longer masked. It was a miserable time to be a journalist, much less an editor, as Afsan Chowdhury says in his prologue to 'A Testament of Time', an anthology of my writings in Holiday between 1965 and 1975. Quoting the above, he further writes: "In this almost dark piece, no party is mentioned and no leaders named, but the agony of trying to be a free man in BKSAL Bangladesh is convincingly conveyed."

But the misery and the agony of the conscript or a bonded labour were soon to end. Holiday lasted exactly a

hundred days following the proclamation of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Second Revolution. It was banned even before the press was going to be thoroughly reorganised, without question in the image of the late President's predilections.

In those days of 1975, the principal external factor in determining what was to be the underling political and economic process in Bangladesh was the ex-Soviet Union, which in the of pursuit of the Brezhnev Doctrine of Collective Security Pact in its contention with the United States, was acting autonomously and even independently of the Indo-Soviet axis. The Collective Security Pact, since fallen to pieces, was designed on the graduated level of bilateral arrangement like the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty (still extant) and the Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty (since expired). 'Holiday', dubbed by the ex-Soviet Mission in Dhaka as 'the enemy paper', in May, 1973 following ceaseless malignant campaign against me and Holiday by the Novosti Press Agency (APN) and Izvestia in chorus with the pro-Soviet and hegemonic section of the Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta press, was to be axed before the ex-Soviet-sponsored one-party, and the official and party media were to be formally put in place. The "enemy paper" was proscribed on May 13, 1975 and I was sent to prison early on the day under the Special Powers' Act on the specific count of harming relations with 'friendly' countries.

The axis had clearly won. The

Moscow-roaders, most of whom have gone bourgeois after the fall of Kremlin, had a celebration to make.

Although the structure and the hierarchy of the single national party, sought to be crafted around the brittle personality cult of late President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was given shape at the apex with the core elements from the AL and the Moscow-roaders on February 24, '75, the composite party would soon turn out to be a behemoth and a politico-bureaucratic amalgam that included the civil and military top brass as well. The newspapers, taken over by the government after independence (Morning News, Bangladesh Observer, and Dainik Bangla), and the independent and party mouthpieces were still around, albeit without any voice of their own. Those "lighted their way to dusty death" on June 16, '75 on pain of the Newspaper (Annulment of Declaration) Ordinance promulgated on the day.

As Dr. Ashoke Mitra wrote under the initials of A.M. in Bombay's prestigious Economic and Political Weekly, "No frivolity is to be allowed from now on, it is going to be one party, one leader, one political line, and dissidents are to be despatched to the gallows. Enayetullah likes the good things of life, he will have to make do with whatever he is able to lay his hands on in prison for he may have stay in for quite a while.

"But never mind the instance of Enayetullah, the second revolution is gathering pace. Everyday more and more

newsmen are joining Sheikh Mujib's composite party... and swearing undying allegiance to the great leader. The non-joiners have a choice: they can go to prison, and languish there. Fortunately few of them will be as foolish as Enayetullah Khan". (A.M. in Bombay's Economic and political weekly, June 4, 1975 as reproduced in the anthology of 'A Testament of Time, Vol. I, by self).

The juggernaut of one-party had finally started rolling down the political avenues and closing all of them. The limited newspaper option allowed in Sylhet prison, where I was incarcerated, would bring to me and my cell-mates the gala account and photographic images of devotees lining up to pay homage to the leader and at the altar of the one-party BKSAL. I thought, I may have been 'foolish' in A.M.'s admiring words, but it was a boon in disguise. I was blissfully spared the indignity of all of it by my absence from the scene. Could I have joined in this pilgrimage to the one-party shrine that muzzled my voice and forced myself to recite in a blasphemous choir: "There is no God but God and the leader is His prophet"? I don't know.

The stage of the one party was fully set. I was getting used to the prison-routine and preparing myself for the long haul. Then suddenly the God of the polity smiled on me. I was released from the Sylhet prison on July 17, and was granted an hour-long audience by the late President on July 29, 75 at the Ganobhaban (now the Prime Minister's official residence), with several other audiences to follow with late Prime Minister Mansur Ali (August 2, 1975) and the highly powerful Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni (August 9, 7), one of secretaries of the BKSAL.

The whole country was like a prison-house then. I could only recite silently in my mind the Hamletian soliloquy:

The Black Day of Newspapers

- Khondker Monirul Alam

In the initial days of June 1975 it was being heard that the Baksal government would cancel the declaration of all newspapers. A shadow of fear and frustration pervaded the faces of all journalists and general workers employed in the newspaper industry. What will be the outcome? Where will they stand with their families and dependants? Many of them spent the whole of their lives in the newspaper industry. Many of them left more lucrative jobs to take up the profession of journalism. They did that for the sake of their ideology, to sacrifice themselves for the greater causes of the nation. What will they do if the newspapers are closed down?

Apprehensive newspaper people as well as others thronged to the old red building of the National Press Club to know if there was any news. A new class of journalist leaders was then coming up and many people were forced to join Baksal in fear of the outrageous activities of these leaders. They joined Baksal only to save their jobs. The red building of the Press Club witnessed the muscle-flexing of these leaders. Of course they and their cohorts had no reason to be afraid. The 'father and brother' would arrange jobs for them. But what would happen to the rest?

That announcement came down amidst such apprehensions on June 16. The declarations of all newspapers and several government publications, except for four dailies, were annulled. The people involved in the newspaper industry were thrown on the streets. The democratic world watched in horror the irrational action of the government. The families of many journalists were shattered by a single decision. A journalist of an English daily was forced by the situation to open a fruit stall on the premises of Baitul Mukarram to earn his livelihood. Many similar incidents occurred at that time.

It is not difficult to understand why the Baksal government took such an outrageous decision to close the newspapers. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman spoke about the freedom of politics, speech and press all through his long political life. No doubt, he believed in those. But it is also true that he lacked sincerity to tolerate the opinions of others. An example is enough to prove this point. Sheikh Mujib did not hesitate at all to disperse the meetings of Moulana Bhashani by

letting loose hooligans. But the fact remains that Sheikh Mujib also respected Moulana Bhashani like a father and Moulana Bhashani also loved his affectionate "Mujibor" like a son. And it is also true that there is a gulf of difference between Sheikh Mujib before independence and Sheikh Mujib after independence in the context of political philosophy and thoughts.

The people of the country gradually became fed up with the misrule of the Awami League soon after the independence of the country. The hopes and inspirations and great sacrifices with which the people fought for and won their independence were demolished within a short time by the oppression, torture, suppression, plunder and autocracy inflicted by the Awami leaders and their musclemen. The famine of 1974 was added to it. Thousands of people died in that famine. There was serious threat to stop publishing pictures of the skeletal figures of emaciated people in newspapers. But all their efforts failed. The picture of women clad in fishing net because of want of clothes was also published. The news of the corruption of the leaders and workers of the party in power and the news of the conflict within the party were also being published in the newspapers. On the other hand, the newspapers were also covering the news of the resistance and movement by the patriotic political organisations.

The publishers, journalists and patrons of the newspapers like the Ganokantha, the Hak Katha and the Spokesman did not bow down to the oppression. All attempts to stop them failed miserably. They disclosed the activities of the Awami-Bakalites as much as they could. The Awami-Baksal government which was intolerant of the opinions of others had no alternative other than closing the newspapers instead of looking for the remedy for the real disease.

Baksal was one-party fascist rule where there was no scope to raise a word against the party and the government. A group of political cronies succeeded in making Sheikh Mujib believe that in order to face the existing political situation, there was no alternative to one party rule.

The Muscovite politicians were in the lead among them. They also

administered the formula of imposing control on the newspapers along with the implementation of one party rule. They advised Sheikh Mujib that the state should control the newspapers and the news agencies exactly the way Pravda and Izvestia and the news agency Tass were controlled in the then Soviet Union. Sheikh Mujib accepted their offer enthusiastically and closed all the newspapers throwing newspaper industry workers and journalists on the streets.

The ban on the publication of the newspapers was withdrawn along with the withdrawal of the ban on the political parties after the political changeover in 1975. And newsmen and democracy loving people of the country sighed with relief.

On assuming the responsibility of governing the country, Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman realized that the importance of multiparty democracy and responsible newspapers in governing the country and the nation on the right track is immeasurable.

On realizing this reality, he took the initiative to modernise the old fashioned newspaper industry. The Bangladesh Press Institute (PIB) was founded at his personal initiative in order to improve the human resource in the newspaper industry. He also constituted the Press Council under the leadership of retired judges so that free and independent journalism does not take an autocratic turn. Provision was kept in both the institutions for accommodating journalists as nominated members of the union of journalists.

Shaheed Zia took personal initiative for the development of the National Press Club, popularly known as the second home for the journalists. A piece of land was given free of cost to the Press Club.

An adequate amount of fund was allocated for building a new building for the club. Government land was allocated in Section 11 of Mirpur for the residential accommodation of journalists. Shaheed Zia also made arrangements for the publication of regional newspapers outside Dhaka and making them economically viable.

He also constituted a Wage Board for the newspapers as a measure to ensure that all the journalists, employees and press workers of the newspaper industry got appropriate salary, allowances and other benefits. The unprecedented evolution and development that we note in the newspaper industry have been made possible because of the steps taken by Shaheed Zia.

The political philosophy of the Awami League is to cause destruction. Therefore on coming back to power after 21 years, they closed down the Bangladesh Times, Dainik Bangla, weekly Bichitra and Ananda Bichitra. They did that because the majority of the newsmen and press workers employed in these newspapers believed in the ideology of nationalism. The younger sister of the then prime minister became the owner editor of the weekly Bichitra.

Several hundred working journalists, employees and press workers were driven out of the Times-Bangla building in the darkness of night. Police was engaged at night to complete this job. The police charged batons and used them ruthlessly. The Hasina government rendered them jobless and set up the Karmasangsthan Bank in this building. The Awami League government repeated the occurrence of June 16 of 1975 in October 1997.

Newspaper people have not forgotten the incident of June 16 and they can never forget it. The journalists unions unanimously took the decision in 1976 to observe June 16 as the black day every year.

The 'black day' in perspective

Bangladesh observes on June 16 the 'black day' to recall with horror a carpet shutdown of all but four of the country's newspapers 27 years ago that threw hundreds of journalists out of work in a ruthless attempt by the then Awami League regime to snuff out democracy and press freedom as part of an outrageous design to set up one-party dictatorship. More than a thousand journalists lost their jobs on 16 June, 1975 after the government proclaimed an ordinance that annulled the declaration of 29 daily newspapers and 138 weeklies and periodicals. Two of the four newspapers that survived the axe were already under government control, whilst the owners of the other two were forced to surrender their property to the state. Born in 1971 after a bloody war of freedom, Bangladesh adopted a Constitution on 4 November, 1972 embracing a Westminster-style multiparty parliamentary system with a pledge to ensure "a democracy in which fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed". But, only a few years later, using the vice of its two-thirds majority in the parliament, the ruling party changed

the Constitution in just five minutes and without any debate, turning the country into a monolithic republic to be eternally ruled by a party named Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BKSAL). The infamous amendment, known as the Fourth Amendment, banished political pluralism and threw freedom of the press out the window. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who termed this sudden change as the "Second Revolution", became the president of the totalitarian state. Instead of the rule of law, the country began to be governed by the rule of Mujib. A weird state of suffocation in a Gestapo-like atmosphere overtook the climate in no time. Any political criticism of Mujib or his government was seen as sacrilegious, the offenders consigned to jail for at least six months. The ban on newspapers was the result of the country's surprise shift to autocracy. Many journalists who became jobless were employed in government offices. Some of them were made inspectors of Customs, sub-registrars and schoolteachers. Others were given some other scut jobs. This they were able to get only after they signed documents pledging loyalty to the new dictatorship. Those

who did not sign were harassed, oppressed and economically impoverished by the denial of any means of livelihood. They thus became victims of the worst form of anarchy. The picture, however, changed when Ziaur Rahman became the President after he survived a sequence of upheavals in August 1975. The man who declared the independence of Bangladesh was also responsible for pulling the country out of the yoke of authoritarianism. He restored multiparty democracy under a presidential system and scrapped ban on newspapers to bring back a breath of fresh air and freedom. No precise explanations are still available as to why the Awami League, particularly its charismatic leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, did have to turn this country into a savage dictatorship only just three and half years after it won its freedom from Pakistan with a great vision of rule of the people. Mujib was known to be a passionate believer of democracy throughout his life and a great public orator. Not unjustifiably do some senior journalists still argue that Mujib was the creation of East Pakistan journalists. This entire sublime ethos vanished in the thin air once he

consolidated his grip on power. Why? Theories however abound the intellectual circle on such change. The plausible one was that Mujib within was diametrically opposite to Mujib without. Another one was that he allowed himself to be a complete prisoner in the hands of wily sycophants and sly relatives, who blocked his vision to see the woods from the trees. He was told that his thoughts were difficult to translate into actions unless he brought all the newspapers under leash. And yet a third theory was that he simply succumbed to the pressure of the then Soviet Union which was trying to expand its sphere of influence in the region. Therefore, when the day came on 25 January 1975 to change the country from democracy to autocracy, Mujib had no choice. The pro-Soviet parties in Bangladesh were quick to offer unconditional support to the changeover. Like people from many other walks of life, there was also a beeline of journalists to join Baksal soon after Mujib made it clear that those who joined would be pampered, given good jobs and housing as well as their family welfare meticulously looked after.

Already pauperised by poor salary after the emergence of a new country and a threat of being permanently without a job breathing down their neck, it was not easy for journalists to forswear such advice. The first batch of 224 Dhaka journalists applied for Baksal membership on 23 May 1975 and the second batch of 302 journalists on 4 June 1975. And yet there was a tiny group of journalists bold enough to refuse to join the party despite veiled threats. Some journalists played a leading role at the time to persuade, or coerce if need be, the journalists to join the party. Mujib later rewarded them appropriately for a "job well done". He made two of them members of the then parliament, one of them state minister. Another was given an ambassadorial job, whilst some others were placed in important positions. A majority of these journalists renounced their Baksal membership soon after the fall of the government on 15 August 1975. They said they were "intimidated and warned of reprisals" in case they refused to join the party. They were not strong enough to withstand that intimidation. The government appointed editors for the four newspapers it allowed to operate after the blanket ban. Sheikh

Fazlul Huq Moni became the editor of the Bangladesh Times, Obaidul Huq of the Bangladesh Observer, Ehtesham Haider Chowdhury of the Dainik Bangla and Nurul Islam Patwary of the Ittefaq. While Moni was the nephew of Sheikh Mujib and was being seen as an heir apparent in the line of succession, it is said that three other editors were chosen very carefully.

However, the press in Bangladesh is free today. There are overwhelmingly more newspapers fiercely critical of the government than those who do endorse the good things that it is trying to do. From the suffocation in the dungeons of darkness has emerged the sunshine of freedom and liberty. The 'black day' that had fallen on this country on 16 June 1975 must always be remembered, because the more we remember, the more perceptibly shall we be able to understand and comprehend the environment of liberty that we breathe and live in today.