

# Mustaque group approached US embassy in Dhaka

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the project to be abandoned. However, the remaining files, mainly raw interviews with nearly a hundred and fifty American officials ranging from the State Department to the Pentagon and the CIA, was a gold mine of detail for someone with a knowledgeable eye.

During this visit to Washington I decided to contact Eugene Boster, the American Ambassador at the time of the 1975 coup, who was based at the State Department headquarters in the capital. I had met Boster on several occasions in Dhaka and had visited his home when the American Ambassador to New Delhi, Daniel Moynihan, on a brief visit to Bangladesh had asked to meet me to discuss an article I had written for The Washington Post which had been somewhat critical of Moynihan. Ambassador Boster organized a small meeting of the three of us over drinks at his residence. However, I had not met Boster since the 1975 coup. I hadn't been quite ready to see him. I wanted to be certain that when I did I was clear about the specific questions I wanted to pose.

When I reached Washington, I called Ambassador Boster and found him very receptive to a meeting. He had followed my writing on Bangladesh for years and he seemed interested in meeting. We set a time. Kai Bird and I met Boster at the State Department. After shaking hands we soon settled into a corner table in the one of the lounges for what would be a long morning of thoughtful discussion. I told Boster I had been looking into how the coup was actually organized and was troubled about what I was turning up. I had learned a good deal about prior contacts and relationships that Mustaque had with U.S. officials in Calcutta during 1971 which had led to his "house arrest" by Bangladesh's Provisional Government led by Tajuddin Ahmed with the cooperation of the Indian authorities.

Mustaque had been the contact point in Calcutta for a maneuver organized by Kissinger to try to split off a section of the Awami League government in exile that would be prepared to negotiate with the Pakistan Army for a settlement short of independence. However, on the

Pakistanis side there was no promise that Mujib and the Awami League would be allowed to govern Pakistan as the majority party. Mujib was then under arrest in West Pakistan as war raged in East Pakistan, known by then throughout the world as "Bangladesh".

Mustaque had conducted these negotiations through the Americans without the knowledge of his senior colleagues in the provisional government. When they were discovered, Mustaque was accused of betraying the independence movement and put under house arrest. I had learned about these events from a key member of Mustaque's own staff in Calcutta who had not agreed with the maneuver that Mustaque was involved in. We had also confirmed key aspects of this account in an interview with Herb Gordon, the American Consul General in Calcutta at the time.

I said to Boster that it was rather curious that Mustaque should reemerge four years later as the man who would be King in the aftermath of Mujib's death. Kai Bird and I were curious to know whether the 1971 contacts had been

renewed between the United States and the Mustaque group. Was it all just a coincidence? We asked the big question: Did the Embassy have any prior contact with the group that had planned and executed the coup against Mujib? We waited for what we expected would be the standard diplomatic answer which would leave us none the wiser.

Boster looked us in the eye and told us facts that we did not expect to hear. He laid it all out. For me it was a bombshell. We would later report, "According to a highly placed U.S. Embassy diplomat, who has insisted upon strict confidentiality, officials at the U.S. Embassy were approached in late 1974 by persons intending to overthrow the government of Sheik Mujibur Rahman. According to this Embassy source a series of meetings took place with Embassy personnel between November 1974 and January 1975. According to [this] senior Embassy official, 'In January 1975 we came to an understanding in the Embassy that we would stay out of it and disengage from those people. I can't say whether there was any approach to the Embassy by any of these people in the period from January to August [1975]. In the period before that they did try to approach us.'"

Our source for this remarkable statement was the American Ambassador to Bangladesh in 1975, Eugene Davis Boster. Boster went further in his comments to us. He confirmed that the group that had approached the U.S. Embassy in the November 1974 to January 1975 period was in fact the

Mustaque group. The Ambassador said that in January 1975 he personally had given strict instructions that no Embassy personnel were to have further contact with this or any other group contemplating a coup d'etat. This extended to the CIA Station Chief, Philip Cherry and his staff.

However, Boster believed an "end run" may have been carried out circumventing his authority as Ambassador. He found it more than a simple coincidence that the same men he had ordered all contact broken with had turned up the day of the coup, amidst great bloodshed, announcing they had taken power. When we asked him if he thought Phil Cherry or the CIA staff had continued contact with those planning to overthrow Mujib without the knowledge of the Ambassador, Boster replied, "Let me answer this question theoretically, outside the context of Bangladesh. No, this kind of thing is not done by the Station Chief. But, as one American to another, it has been done. There have been lapses. We should always be informed by the Station Chief about his activities or contacts. But, I cannot guarantee that Cherry was not making contacts that were not approved by the Ambassador." We agreed on this phrasing where he referred to himself in the third person. However, Boster was convinced that contact had continued and the men who carried out the coup correctly or wrongly believed they would be accepted by the United States once Mujib was gone. If they failed, we wouldn't know who they were. If they succeeded, the United

States would quietly back the regime.

It was an extraordinary moment. The American Ambassador was alleging to two American journalists that his CIA Station Chief had aided and abetted the coup against the explicit instructions of the Ambassador.

Together we speculated on whom in Washington or Langley would have had the authority to give a "green light" and countermand the Ambassador's instructions. Following Richard Nixon's resignation a year earlier and the emergence of Gerald Ford, as a weak presidential figure, there was only one "President of Foreign Policy" in Washington and this was Henry Kissinger. But, would Kissinger who distained the smaller nations in favor of the mighty powers have even bothered with a peripheral coup on the fringe of his very grand horizon?

Personally, I was then skeptical about Kissinger covertly reaching into obscure details of military plotting in far off Bangladesh. I maintained this view for quite awhile even after interviewing one of Kissinger's former aides on the National Security Council, Roger Morris, who wrote a highly critical biography of his former employer

entitled Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger & American Foreign Policy.

In September 1978 I sat down with Morris to talk about Bangladesh and Henry Kissinger. Whether one agrees with him or not, his comments were particularly cogent. Morris had the following observation:

"In early 1975 I was interviewing for my book a man who was then one of Kissinger's closest aides and most senior confidants. I have known him well. In utter seriousness, and not at all as a criticism of Kissinger's policy he said there had been three nemeses of American foreign policy in the Kissinger era. These were the three 'most hated men' on Kissinger's 'foreign enemies list'. He said they were Allende, Thieu and Mujib. It was not a matter of having allies or having enemies or adversaries, but simply these people had upset the apple cart in various ways. Allende is clear enough. Obviously he though Thieu, as the record now shows, was an obstruction to the deal he was trying to cut with the North Vietnamese. He was always having to go back to Saigon to bomb or to do something to get Thieu to agree.

Mujib, however, I would have thought, wasn't quite in that league. Nevertheless, Kissinger did feel at

the time [1971] that the events in East Pakistan were so damaging, so distracting, and so potentially disastrous for his China diplomacy on which so much else rested including the Vietnam negotiations; and here was this unnecessary irritation on the flank of an obstreperous politician who was not behaving in the proper way... Instead of understanding that these forces were outside his control and it wasn't a matter of thwarting Henry Kissinger or his plans for the world, there was a highly personal element in Kissinger's diplomacy and therefore an element of revenge...