

Remembering 16 December

S.G. JILANEE

‘A Tale of Two Cities’ by Charles Dickens, begins with, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was the spring of hope; it was the winter of despair.” Similar remarks mutatis mutandis may apply to 16 December 1971 in the history of Pakistan, such as, “It was the happiest day; it was the saddest day. It was the day of rejoicing; it was the day of mourning. It was the day of resounding victory; it was the day of disgraceful defeat. If Dickens’ story was about London and Paris, 16 December was about Islamabad and Dhaka.

It was the happiest day for the people of what was East Pakistan until a day before. It marked the birthday of a new nation. As the sun rose from behind the verdant ambience of the paddy fields ripe with grain and ready for aman harvest, a thunderous roar of ‘Jai Bangla’ rent the air across the entire landscape - from the hills of Bandarban to the woods of the sundarbans. Grim faces and furtive looks gave place to cheerful smiles. For many Bangalis the euphoria was like what they had experienced once before, on 14 August 1947. But this time the thrill was greater because almost every soul had been involved with Bangladesh’s birth and experienced its birth pangs.

The Bangalis were in a state of rapture. They had disproved the assumption that because they were not of a martial race, they were incapable of fighting. Today they were victors; having defeated an army that was reputed to be one of the best trained fighting forces.

Although technically it was India’s victory but it could not happen without the vital contribution of the local population that had harassed the Pakistan troops to the point of asphyxiation with their guerrilla war.

The afternoon of December 16, 1971 drew the curtain on the gory dreams that had begun on March 25. As Pakistan’s chief of the Eastern Command, Lt. Gen. (Tiger) Niazi ceremonially handed over his service revolver to India’s Lt. Gen. Arora at the Paltan Maidan in Dhaka and signed the instrument of surrender, Pakistan stood amputated. Its eastern part had ceased to be.

For Islamabad, -the capital of the residual Pakistan, it was the saddest day; a day of lamentation and unbounded grief; -grief not only at the loss of half the country but also at the humiliation of surrender. Dhaka was thrilled; Islamabad was traumatized. “Ninety-three thousand of the best fighters were made prisoners.” It was preposterous! In 1965 Pakistan had fought for 17 days to a stalemate. At the end there was the Tashkent. Here the ‘war’ declared on December 3 ended in just 13 days, and without Pakistani troops ever having an opportunity of displaying the battlefield valour they were proud of.

On this day, while Bangalis were moving about freely for the first time in nine months, Pakistani officers, who had been administering East Pakistan, lay holed up in the Hotel Intercontinental, which had been declared a sanctuary by the ICRC. Others, who had sided with Pakistani troops, were wearing the same hunted expression as

Bangalis did for fear of the Pakistani army.

Though a number of books have been written by both sides on the event, there has hardly been an attempt to study the causes of the disaster objectively without bias. Such a study would be more useful for Pakistan and its policymakers especially in view of the fact that no lesson seems to have been learnt. As late Khurshid Hasan Mir, in an article on this day once observed, “We lost half the country but we did not lose our bravado.” It would be profitable even yet to ask the question, sincerely, “What went wrong?” and find out the answer. Not to reclaim Bangalis into the fold once again, but to keep those who are still in the embrace, from tearing themselves away.

For instance, in 1947, the people of the Sylhet district of Assam had “opted” for Pakistan. Unlike the Bangalis, who became Pakistanis by “destiny,” they were Pakistanis “by choice,” and were proud of it. Yet, in 1971, even these people had joined the fight for “liberation” from Pakistan’s control.

Actually, Bangalis, even educated ones, were basically simple, sincere, unsophisticated. It was their passion for Pakistan that made them observe the Direction Action Day on 16 August 1946. Nowhere else did the Muslims respond to Jinnah’s call with such ardour. This was what lit the spark that ignited the Noakhali riots and Bihar massacre and ultimately hastened the birth of Pakistan.

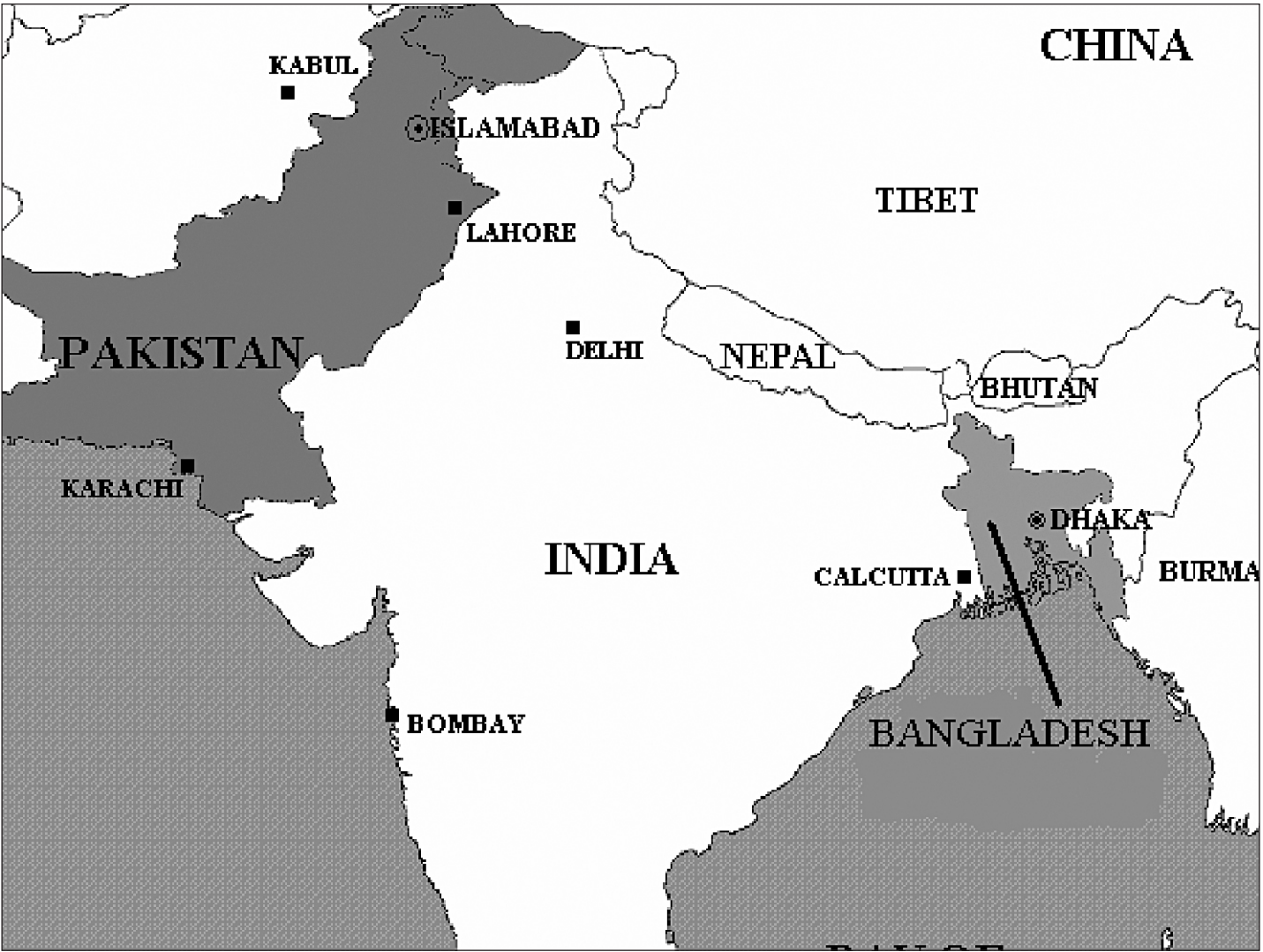
The blood they gave in the Great Calcutta Killing was the first sacrifice of the Bengali Muslims for Pakistan. The second was when they elected Liaquat Ali Khan from their own quota

in the Constitutional Assembly. He was not even from West Bengal but from Karnal in East Punjab. As a Punjabi, he should, in all fairness, have been elected from Pakistani Punjab. But it was the Bangalis who accepted him while Punjabis gave him no quarter. But the real political hara-kiri that the East Pakistanis gave for the unity of Pakistan was their acceptance of parity.

It was a cruel irony for Quaid-e-Azam therefore, to believe that Hindus could influence the Bengali Muslims and drive a wedge between them and the West Pakistanis. Thus, he made the fateful declaration at this Curzon Hall appearance in 1948 that “Urdu, -and Urdu, alone, shall be the national language of Pakistan.” Unwittingly he had blown the wind that ultimately developed into a whirlwind that swept half the country away.

What happened was a case of poetic justice. It was an action replay of the Muslim League’s struggle for Pakistan. The West Pakistanis did to the East Pakistanis what the Congress had done to the Muslims in India. But here it was even more grotesque. There it was the hegemony of numerical superiority. Here, on the contrary, it was the aggression of the minority over the majority.

Implementing Jinnah’s declaration, the Urdu-speaking West Pakistanis almost ran amuck. They saw no use for learning Bengali, to communicate with the local people, like British officers did in the past. They made no effort to understand the East Pakistanis. Nobody knew or cared to know how fiercely passionate Bangalis were about their religion. In the nineteenth century, for example,



Titu Mir laid down his life in an armed resistance against the Hindu landlord, who had tried to levy a tax from his Muslim ryots for Durga Puja. And as to Bengali political awareness, it had long been said, “What Bengal thinks today, India would think tomorrow.”

The birth of the All-India Muslim League in Bengal is proof of this adage. Moreover, far from picking crumbs from any royal table they had never even experienced serfdom in spite of the zamindari system of landholding in Bengal.

Twenty plus years was enough

time for studying the economic and political drift and to make corrections. This was never done. In one word, as Hindu hegemony and injustice had led to Pakistan; so West Pakistani hegemony and injustice led to Bangladesh!

The tragedy has a lesson for

Pakistan’s rulers and political leaders that they would do well to heed.

The author has contributed this article from Karachi, Pakistan.

Sufferings are in store

BRIGADIER GENERAL SHAMSUDDIN AHMED (Retd)

We are passing through a very critical juncture of our history. This situation has been created by our politicians the same politicians we opted to vote for during the 2001 general elections. We have had elections under the caretaker government system before also. But never before has the neutrality of the Chief Advisor (CA) of the caretaker government (CTG), the Election Commission (EC) and the Civil Administration (CA) been questioned the way it is being done now. The fault is not that of the opposition led by Awami League (AL). The fault lies squarely with the immediate past BNP-Jamat alliance government. It is they who began conspiring plot after plot to manipulate election by removing all vestiges of neutrality and planting their own ‘men’ in all vitally important places in order to deliver an electoral verdict in favor of the BNP-Jamat alliance. There are four institutions directly concerned with the conduct of general election the President, the CTG, the EC and the civil administration. It is a pity that none of these institutions has been left with any semblance of neutrality by the immediate past government.

Perhaps the worst affected is the country’s bureaucracy. All the past governments of this country, autocratic and democratic alike except the Sheikh Mujib government have tried to politicize the bureaucracy. But no government has done it so clinically and with such finesse as the BNP Jamat alliance government has done. The result is that today it is well nigh impossible to replace a bureaucrat known for his leaning towards the BNPJamat with someone utterly neutral and loyal only to the republic and the constitution unless of course you dig out someone suitable from the OSD Pool or the retired list. Civil servants who would like to serve the people and the country with unflinching loyalty, dedication, dignity and poise have all been pushed to the background. This is the greatest disservice the past BNP government has done to this country.

Khaleda Zia and Nizami government then took care of the Presidency by removing President Badruddza Chowdhury, the founder BNP Secretary General, once the closest associate of Ziaur Rahman and arguably the architect of BNP Jamat alliance victory in the last general election, most unceremoniously. The former President was literally booted out of office and humiliated by the ruling party hoodlums just because he felt it unbecoming of him and very rightly so to visit the grave of Zia. And in came the incumbent President Professor Iajuddin Ahmed, known for his proBNP political leanings during his university days as a teacher. Mr. Iajuddin is too weak a man physically and otherwise to assert his authority. Those who planted him in Bangabhaban knew for sure that he would play the BNP card and would not waver in his loyalty to BNP. Should he falter, the past

speaker Mr. Jamiruddin Sircar, a thoroughbred BNP-Jamat man is there as a stand by to step into the Presidency. The arrangement has worked well so far.

Next to be focused upon by the alliance government was the probable Head of the non-party care taker government who, as per the constitution, has to be the person who among the retired chief justices retired last. Head of the caretaker government plays a very crucial role in the conduct of general election. There was Justice K M Hassan with a pro-BNP political background, having been actively involved in BNP politics as a lawyer. But he was not in the reckoning as a likely contender for

admitted in fairness to Justice Hassan that his past political affiliation with BNP notwithstanding, he gave a good account of himself as a man of integrity, courage and patriotism as expected of men having reached that exalted position as a Justice. He certainly stood taller than what most of his detractors and patrons thought him to be. But the BNP-Jamat alliance was the least prepared to see reason and abide the constitution. They literally forced President Iajuddin to jump the queue and arrogate to himself the power and authority of CA of the CTG that in all fairness should have gone to Justice Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury. Justice Mahmudul

the other commissioners have become highly controversial by their conduct in preparing a largely flawed voter list flouting the superior court verdict and allegedly appointing BNP-Jamat activists as election officials at field level with a malafide intention of vote rigging in favor of BNP-Jamat alliance. Although the Chief Election Commissioner Justice Aziz has been forced to go on three months leave, the EC is far from being neutral and depoliticized because the self declared acting chief election commissioner Justice Mahfuzur Rahman and other election commissioners are very much there to implement the unfinished work of Justice Aziz.

With BNP High Command apparently breathing down his neck and practically calling shots from behind the scene, President-cum-Chief Advisor Iajuddin Ahmed has now brought the country on the verge of a political catastrophe reminiscent of the dictatorial Ershad era. Unless and until the learned Professor, now fortuitously placed at the helm of affairs of the country, can be bold enough as urged by our Nobel Laureate Prof Yunus in ensuring truth, justice and impartiality in so far as conducting the up coming general election in a thoroughly depoliticized and neutral ambience is concerned, we will for sure be in a crisis of our life time.



the post of the CA of the CTG unless the age limits for retirement of Judges of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court were increased through constitutional amendment. Therefore the BNP-Jamat alliance government waited for the appropriate time and increased the age limits for retirement of justices of Appellate Division, suitably paving the way for Justice Hassan to be the first contender for the post of CA of the CTG. This was a subtle and clever move by the government to have a man of their choice as the CA of the CTG. But the opposition lost no time to condemn it as the past antecedents of Justice Hassan were well known. We have all witnessed country wide political agitation by the opposition against Hassan being a contender for the post of CA. Good sense prevailed upon Justice Hassan as he declined the offer by the President to become the CA in the face of the violent street agitation by the opposition. In hind sight it must be

Amin Chowdhury is fully qualified and willing to assume the responsibility of CA. Strictly speaking, assumption of the office of CA by President Iajuddin without going through the relevant provisions of the constitution step by step is unconstitutional, illegal and unlawful as has been amply vindicated by the writ petitions challenging the legality of the take over and by the sudden stay order by the Chief Justice allegedly preempting the delivery of verdict by the hearing court.

Finally the BNP-Jamat alliance government focused its attention on politicization of the EC. With the chief election commissioner Sayed Ahmed having completed his tenure, the government lost no time in appointing Justice Aziz, an out and about BNP crony as Chief Election Commissioner and three other like minded election commissioners including Zakaria. It is no exaggeration to say that the incumbent chief election commissioner Justice Aziz and all

Thanks to the sincere efforts of some Advisors, a package deal was negotiated with the opposition whereby two election commissioners, namely Zakaria and Mudabbir were to go on long leave and one or two new election commissioners including an acting chief election commissioner were to be appointed and work on updating the flawed voter list was to begin soon. But as I write this piece the President-cum-CA Professor Iajuddin is reported to be putting a spoke in the wheel of the package deal by deciding against SM Zakaria going on long leave in line with the stance adopted by the BNP. So we are back to square one and the so-called light at the end of the tunnel is disappearing fast. The most disconcerting news is that, disregarding strong objections from the Advisory Council, President Iajuddin Ahmed has ordered army deployment in aid of the civil administration and banned all forms of agitation around Bangabhaban.

If our past political history is any guide, the opposition political alliance will soon be on the streets and will in all probability stay on the course much to the agony of the people of this hapless country. If we look back, it has always been the intransigent attitude of our rulers not accepting the truth that democratic rights of the people can be denied for some time but not for long which has forced the people to agitate and court sufferings. To ask for a free and fair election in order to establish people’s authority to elect good and well meaning people as their chosen representatives to run the affairs of their country is one such inalienable democratic right of the people. The people will fight to establish their rights and will suffer in the process of their struggle. Suffering is possibly in store for us.

The writer is a freedom fighter.

Civil-military relationship

GYASUDDIN A. CHOWDHURY

THE question of the army’s role in politics creeps in, in almost all spheres, particularly when the country is faced with a political crisis. It has been experienced that not only the military rulers, but also the elected governments of Bangladesh, had tried to use the army for their partisan interest. It is also the result of political consideration, mixed with the sense of security when the people often start talking about intervention by military. The reason for this may be ascribed to the fact that the army had played a role in the ups and downs of the political events during the first two decades of our independence. But after the successful revival of democratic governance the possibility of the army’s interference is diminishing. Unfortunately, at this crucial juncture of the crisis a lot of discussion/assessment is being carried out about the army’s role.

The military in Bangladesh today is an institution, so to say, well organized and disciplined. This well organized and disciplined institution can have an influence upon events and developments if political leaders prove to be incapable of handling national problems. The fear psychosis that runs in the political circle emanates from this power and capabilities.

The experiences of the past reflect the multiple problems facing civil-military relations. This is more so because a political force was overthrown by the young army officers in 1975 through assassination of the president of the country. Since then the army managed to stay in power through military rule with modified democratic system till 1990.

The people of Bangladesh achieved independence after a long struggle of 24 years against the oppression of the Pakistani military and civil bureaucracy. One of the major demands of the struggle was to establish democracy, in conjunction with other factors of economic freedom. After nine long months of the war of independence democracy was established in Bangladesh. To achieve independence the Bangladeshi military led the Mukti Bahini in the armed struggle against the occupation army by standing beside the political leaders.

Due to poor leadership coup and counter-coup took place in the country, and a good number of highly nationalist and dedicated senior officers were killed in rebellion within the army, and hundreds of military personnel were sentenced to death. All these left a deep scar in the history of nation.

The stories of corruption and debauchery of a military leader, particularly of a military chief who was a self-proclaimed president, is the dark part of the history of the nation. Hangings and dismissals/retirements of the dedicated freedom fighters

totally changed the army’s structure. As a consequence, the hatred and sense of opposition to the military in various sections of the people, and the society as a whole, grew stronger. For all these one can blame a handful of the power-mongering senior military officers, with corrupt officials as cohorts. They had associated themselves with the corrupt and conspiratorial politics of their boss. As a result mistrust and fear gained ground within military. The severe damage to civil-military relations, and the division, was rendered during that period.

Political parties, while in power, politicize the military. Senior officers are promoted and placed in key positions, considering their personal loyalty instead of their merits and quality. This was started at the time of President Ershad, and his legacy became deep rooted subsequently during the rule of political parties. The Defense Services Intelligence, particularly DGFI, is supposed to look into the affairs of the armed forces. But they are used to bug telephones and chase and harass the retired armed forces officers as well as opposition politicians, a task which is outside their jurisdiction. Even retired officers having no record of subversion except for supporting opposition parties are suspended from playing golf in the Kurmitola Golf Club which is run by a civilian organization.

The Bangladesh army is a highly motivated nationalist army because of its deep-rooted involvement in the war of independence, and its birth that took place from the power of bullets. The army, which is one of its kind, was raised and organized by those dedicated freedom fighters. After the birth of the nation those highly motivated and emotionally charged young officers could never reconcile with the ill doings of the political leaders. Unfortunately, after independence the politicians ignored the contribution of the freedom fighters and never tried to gain the confidence and loyalty of these highly motivated nationalist forces. Instead of inducting them into nation building and using their zeal and enthusiasm, mistrust by the politicians prevailed. Also, through a conspiracy, a group succeeded in eliminating the highly dedicated nationalist freedom fighters from the scene.

After the mysterious killing of President Ziaur Rahman, Lt General Ershad wasted no time and overthrew the elected President Justice Sattar in a bloodless coup. However, at last, a strong anti-Ershad sentiment grew within the civil and military hierarchy who managed to overthrow the autocratic regime.

The political leaders must understand that the Bangladesh military is not the Pakistan military, composed of soldiers from the other part i.e. West Pakistan. They had no kith and

kin in East Pakistan to care for. Unlike the Pakistan army, our military is politically conscious and are divided almost in half, having support for the ruling party as well the opposition. Using the army for the interest of a particular group for political reasons will be counter-productive and disastrous. One should never think that the generals commanding the army divisions or brigades can lead the troops into illogical actions for their ulterior motives. Always there are others in the rank and file who also matter a great deal during a political crisis.

As such, politicians should never drag the army into politics for their own benefit. The supreme task of the military is to safeguard the frontiers, and protect the sovereignty of the country. During peacetime, our army always did a commendable job at the time of national disaster and calamities. It also undertook duties in aid of civil power. However, the army should never take action which is against the constitution and which is anti-people, or carry out deployment as a partisan act. The head of the state should be advised not to undertake such a venture that provides scope for apprehension.

Today, we are going through a most difficult political crisis in the country. The constitution is being interpreted by groups as it suits them. Day to day life is paralysed; the economy is being affected badly. Loyal senior army officers appointed as DGNSI and DGFI by the previous government are still holding their posts under the caretaker government. They have lost their neutrality for which most of the people are very much concerned, although they do not dare to speak out in public. Surely the army chief has a neutral role to play, along with his agencies, in this regard during the time of a caretaker government. A respected former chief of army staff and a few other respected advisers have resigned, putting democracy and the country into serious crisis for which a political party is to be blamed.

Democratic institutions, political awareness, honest political leadership and good governance may ensure excellent relationship between civil and military in a country. However, during the most critical political crisis the army has some role to play, at least it should advise the head of the state about probable action to be taken to satisfy all the parties and assure the nation. No one should dare to manipulate armed forces for their gain during such crisis.

The author served as DMO at the AHQs and as Ambassador abroad.

Henceforth, the ‘Strategic Issues’ page will be published every Saturday.