

NOTES FROM HISTORY

March 1971 and growth of Bengali militancy

EDITORIAL DESK

WHEN General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan, Pakistan's military ruler, announced on March 1, 1971, the postponement of the session of the newly elected National Assembly in Dhaka, Pakistan's eastern province exploded in fury. A cricket game at Dhaka stadium came to a swift end as crowds surged onto the streets to protest what was widely perceived to be Yahya's perfidy.

Earlier, on February 13, having met Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, chief of the Awami League and leader of the majority party in the National Assembly, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, chairman of the Pakistan People's Party which held the second largest number of seats in the legislature, the president declared that the assembly would meet in Dhaka to frame a constitution for the country.

Under the provisions of the Legal Framework Order, the elected representatives of the country, 313 in all, would produce a constitution, following which power would be transferred to a civilian government.

Only days after the Awami League's sweeping triumph at the

general elections in December 1970, President Yahya had referred to Mujib as Pakistan's future prime minister.

Politics in Pakistan, however, took a distinct nosedive when, on February 15, Z.A. Bhutto declared that his party could not attend the National Assembly session without a guarantee of concessions from the Awami League over the Six Point program for regional autonomy.

On the AL's behalf, General Secretary Tajuddin Ahmed described Bhutto's position as absurd. When Yahya called off the scheduled March 1 session of the assembly, Bengali militancy took rapid strides in East Pakistan, which was now being referred to as Bangladesh by its people.

On March 2, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called a general strike all over the province, thus effectively bringing it under his control as the elected leader of the nation.

On the same day, the students of Dhaka University, under the banner of the Chhatra Sangram Parishad and led by A.S.M Abdur Rab, Noor-e-Alam Siddiqui, Abdul Kuddus Makhani and Shahjahan Siraj, raised the flag, for the first time, of what was soon to be a free Bangladesh. This act radicalized the Bengali protests even more.

The next day, March 3, President Yahya Khan was back on air, this time to inform the country that he was calling a round table conference of political leaders in Dhaka on March 10 to defuse the situation.

Bhutto, who had earlier refused to attend the NA session, now eagerly accepted the invitation to the RTC. For his part, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rejected the invitation outright, and made it clear that the people of Bangladesh would settle for nothing less than a full session of the National Assembly. Yahya's plan thus fell apart. Meanwhile, Bangladesh was under the clear leadership of Bangabandhu.

The Awami League had clearly established a de-facto administration. On the streets, Bengalis from all sectors of society marched to demand full independence for Bangladesh.

Eminent personalities like Quazi Motahar Hossain and Begum Sufia Kamal gave impetus to the growing struggle through demanding an establishment of Bengali democratic rights.

The momentum thus generated led the officers and employees of Radio Pakistan Dhaka into renaming the station as Dhaka Betar. It was one more sign of the

way Bangladesh's people were surely and swiftly moving away from Pakistan.

The fury of the Bengali protest had not been anticipated by the ruling circles based in Islamabad. The Yahya junta, and even Bhutto, were unable to tackle a situation they had not been prepared for.

While support for Mujib was total in Bangladesh, in West Pakistan politicians such as Asghar Khan, Khan Abdul Wali Khan and Mufti Mahmood came down hard on Bhutto for having precipitated the crisis.

On March 6, the soft-spoken governor of East Pakistan, Vice Admiral Syed Mohammad Ahsan, resigned (and that was only days after General Sahibzada Yaqub Khan, the zonal martial law administrator, had quit and been replaced by General Tikka Khan).

The regime quickly replaced him with Tikka Khan, who now was martial law administrator as well as governor. But Tikka soon discovered he was not going to have an easy sailing when Justice B.A. Siddiqui, the chief justice of the East Pakistan High Court, declined to swear him in as governor.

The protests on the streets, the

domination of the campuses by students, and the everyday expressions of support for the non-violent non-cooperation movement Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had launched were all chipping away at the state of Pakistan itself.

In a number of cities and towns, soldiers of the Pakistan army fired into the crowds, prompting more anger among the population. Meanwhile, as the non-cooperation movement gathered pace, speculation arose over what Bangabandhu would say at the public rally he was scheduled to address at the Race Course on March 7.

It was clear that the students in particular and people in general expected him to declare Bangladesh an independent state on the day.

Foreign news media, as also newspapers in West Pakistan, remained in a state of suspended animation. The military junta at that point was unsure of how to respond should Mujib go for a unilateral declaration of independence for Bangladesh.

A number of West Pakistani politicians openly called on Yahya Khan to stave off an even graver crisis by handing over power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.



On the evening of March 6, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman huddled with his team to deliberate on the specifics of his address at the public rally the following day. The Bangladesh flag, a crimson sun topped with a map of the province against a background of green,

fluttered on rooftops in the capital and elsewhere.

As the day deepened into night, the erosion of the authority of the Pakistan state went on unstoppable in its eastern province. It was no more a question of how Pakistan could be saved. It had

become more a matter of how Bangladesh could turn into a sovereign state.

Yunus, politics and interest rates

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SAFI KHAN

ONE would imagine that anyone with even a hint of objectivity, if left to simply choose between the politicians and Professor Yunus, would pick the latter. Yet, you wouldn't necessarily think so, judging from the varied responses so far. What is equally mystifying is when critics point to Grameen Bank's interest rate as an indicator of Professor Yunus's lacking as a politician.

To challenge Bangladesh's powerful nexus of politicians, special interest groups, and bureaucrats, would entail a complete 180 degree turn by the major political parties. But does any rational thinking person truly believe that this will happen anytime soon?

While we are now hearing the two main parties talking about self-reflection and purging of corrupt leaders, what indications do we have from their past to prove that this is not merely a stop-gap measure in public relations?

Thus, unless people with a different mindset enter politics, change is highly unlikely. Professor Yunus's entering politics may act as the catalyst for large numbers



who have not been part of, or corrupted by, mainstream politics to enter, and thereby impact upon, the political culture.

With regard to elections, it may be quite a gamble for Professor Yunus to stand himself at the initial stage. Take the example of Imran Khan in Pakistan. While this comparison may be flawed on many grounds, the point I am trying to make is that an individual's popularity does not necessarily translate into votes.

This is particularly tricky when a large part of the electorate's decision-making hinges upon negative voting or coercion. A loss would,

therefore, be recorded as an inaccurate reflection that Bangladeshis prefer corrupt politicians, while at the same time it could discourage future generations from entering mainstream politics.

Another concern is ensuring that special interest groups do not infiltrate the party, especially when it comes to financing. One strategy could be to follow something akin to what Senator John McCain pioneered in 2000, and Governor Howard Dean took to another level in 2004.

Even though both lost their respective US presidential primaries, they were able to raise substantial funds by pooling large numbers of small donations. Dean, in particular, was able to attract a significant portion from the young. Professor Yunus could also tap non-resident Bangladeshis in this regard.

Finally, does the so-called "high interest rate" of Grameen Bank disqualify Professor Yunus as a political candidate? The fundamental problem with this line of argument is that most critics tend to equate micro-credit with traditional banks.

This is like comparing apples with oranges (or Professor Yunus

with Imran Khan). Traditional banks do not lend to the poor. If they did, there would be no Grameen Bank. The only remotely comparable traditional banking instrument that comes to mind is credit cards (essentially unsecured loans). And guess what? The interest on these is far higher than regular banking rates. The reality is that unsecured credit entails higher rates.

More importantly, if one looks at previous programs where micro-credit was offered at lower than market rates, the poor simply did not get access to it. The richer groups tend to either infiltrate these programs, or the credit managers tend to prefer them as more "credit-worthy" customers.

There is even an economic term -- adverse selection -- for this type of behaviour. For the poor to have access to credit, interest rates need to be higher than the market rates. So the real base for comparison is with other micro-finance institutions, and there Grameen Bank has one of the lowest, if not the lowest, interest rates in the sector.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

The surge that might work



FAREED ZAKARIA

writes from Washington

American people."

We don't intend to side with anyone. We're trying to be even-handed and build a single, democratic nation. But this attempt at neutrality is collapsing in Iraq's bloody sectarian reality.

Last week's uproar over allegations that Shiite policemen in Baghdad had raped a 20-year-old Sunni woman vividly illustrates how trust between the two communities has been shattered.

Shiite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki first ordered an investigation, then 12 hours later declared the woman a liar, freed and rewarded the alleged rapists and later fired a Sunni official who had called for an unbiased investigation.

Meanwhile we're stuck in the middle, promising to uncover the truth while both sides are convinced that we've betrayed them. This is the definition of a no-win strategy.

The United States needs to find fresh approaches that won't feed the sectarian dynamic and will address the needs of ordinary Iraqis, not the political elites who are jockeying for power. Most important, we need to find a strategy whose costs are sustainable.

Militarily this means drawing down our forces to around 60,000 troops and concentrating on Al Qaeda in Anbar province. The surge we should be pushing instead is a political one, and even more critically, an economic one.

An economic surge is long overdue. One of the less-remarked-upon blunders of the Coalition Provisional Authority

was that -- consumed by free-market ideology v -- it shut down all of Iraq's state-owned enterprises.

This crippled the bulk of Iraq's non-oil economy, threw hundreds of thousands of workers into the streets and further alienated the Sunnis, who were the managerial class of the country.

The economic effects of this decision have been seismic. For example, Iraq's agricultural productivity has plummeted because fertilizer plants were summarily closed. Unemployment in non-Kurdish Iraq remains close to 50 percent, which helps explain why so many young men are joining gangs, militias and insurgent groups.

The Iraqi government has billions in oil revenue of its own but is so dysfunctional that it cannot move a new project through the system. So the factory is idle. A major global consulting firm has reviewed Iraq's state-owned enterprises and estimated that it would cost \$100 million to restart all of them and employ more than 150,000 Iraqis -- \$100 million. That's as much money as the American military will spend in Iraq in the next 12 hours.

said one official working on the project.

Of the original 193 state enterprises, 143 could be restarted soon, says Brinkley. Management and workers are desperate to get jobs. The problem is money. Brinkley points out that his next target, a ceramics factory in Ramadi, is only waiting for two generators before it can reopen.

They cost \$1 million each. But funds for this purpose are hard to find. Washington has pledged more than \$18 billion to fund "reconstruction" in Iraq but will not appropriate a cent to start up state-owned Iraqi companies.

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Waheedul Haque: In heartfelt remembrance

DEAREST KAKU,

I remember a night in 1987, when I saw you from afar. You were mingling with artists and guests outside the Shilpkala Academy auditorium after a performance of Anandadhwani's "Thakur Barir Gaan." We had not yet met.

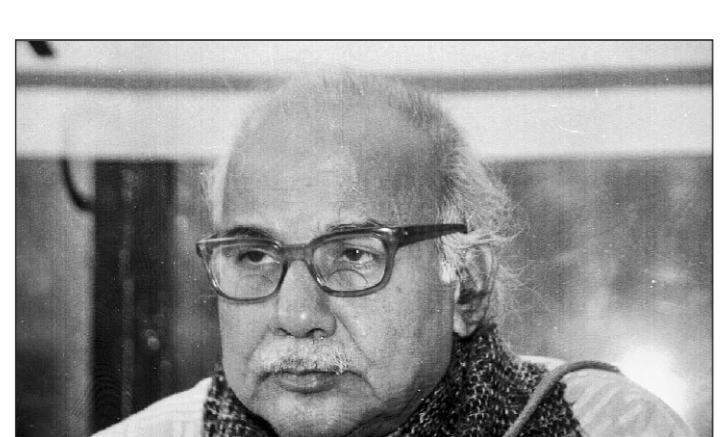
My husband and I were in our teens. He had brought me to the performance, and when he left me standing by the auditorium door to go speak to you, I saw you gather him in your arms. You looked in my direction as he pointed me out.

It was not until a year later, however, that we were formally introduced... on a night train ride to Rajshahi. I had come from New York on another summer vacation, and was traveling with my uncle's family and their many friends, including you.

We were a large, loud group consisting of young and old. You were as comfortable conversing with us as you were with our guardians, perhaps even more so. The intellectual level of the dialogues with the youngsters made an impression. Your narrations on the subtleties of Bengali grammar and prose, however, were somewhat going over my head.

Halfway throughout the journey, we boarded the ferry and at one point, the younger generation accompanied you to the roof and sat down on the floor. We encountered fierce winds, and almost as suddenly as the rain started to pour did the group break out in unison, "Aashar, kotha hote aaj pele chhara..."

Having previously become



enamored with and immersing myself in Rabindrasangeet, I perceived myself to be acquainted with the musical genre, its known artists, and hundreds of renditions. Yet, I had heard nothing like this. The chorus approached near perfection, as aesthetically pleasing to the ear as a Gregorian polyphony.

After the song ended and before we were to truly become close. Apprised by my fiancé that our relationship had gotten serious, you sought to get to know me better. Thus it was that one brilliant summer afternoon, you appeared at the house in Dhaka where I resided, clad in your familiar, utterly Bengali attire.

I was struck again by the ease of your movements. The three of us sat on a sun-drenched verandah and spoke, of nothing in particular at first. Yet, slowly but surely, as the days passed, you coaxed a shy 21 year old into speaking of what she was learning at university, what she was reading.

You narrated beautifully composed and intricately detailed tales in Eastern history, culture, and subtleties, I thought to myself that this was probably the closest I would ever come to experiencing what those nearest to Rabindranath must have.

Taking me by the hand, you introduced me to those closest to you throughout Dhaka and in

on Madame Curie, Rosalind Franklin, Barbara McClintock and other women in science, on plate tectonics and the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, on "selfish genes," on Penrose and consciousness, on the Big Bang and the Manhattan Project, on ancient civilizations and existing wonders, etc.

We spoke of Euripides' Medea, of Shakespeare and E.B. Browning, of Conrad and O'Neill, of Marquez and Kundera, of Spinoza and Hume, of Vermeer and I.M. Pei, of symmetry in classical Greek sculpture.

Could Plato's Theory of Forms be the origin of both Christianity and Marxism? How does one account for variations among different renditions of such a tightly structured form as the symphony in Western Classical music?

Is Harold Bloom correct in asserting that exposure to the western canon is essential to becoming a literate individual? Can Descartes be discussed within a literary, as well as philosophical, context? How did Maya die off? Was there anything you hadn't read?

I was just beginning to cover the texts and there was an excitement in me. Yet, to this day I remain amazed and truly gratified that a thinker of your stature chose to sit and talk to someone as common, as ordinary as I.

Our discussions continued, and my ease and confidence in sharing my thoughts grew.

Nevertheless, as more time passed, the individuals in the garlands you strung me into grew older. We married, started families, and

became busy and pragmatic. Ultimately, armed with the talent and self-confidence that you helped to instill, we grew arrogant, drifting apart from you, forming groups, and excluding others.

Yet, undeterred, you tirelessly continued stringing new garlands across this country and beyond its borders. With a simplicity of manner and attire that deceptively hid the legend that you were, you tried to change this society one individual at a time.

As we clung to each other in agonizing restlessness that of January 27 with tears streaming down our faces, waiting to hear the unthinkable, we wondered how we would ever continue without your presence, your guidance.

I am told that on the day of your admission to the hospital, you spoke of a Japanese gardener brought for his expertise to Santiniketan, and of the cross-cultural ties that formed, one by one, producing direct descendants that reside even in Bangladesh.

Supposedly, you shook your head softly as you reassured yourself, "You people will remember, you will remember." But how could we ever forget, dearest Kaku, that for a fleeting moment in our so mundane lives, you showed us a world of unearthly beauty and camaraderie.

Yes, you were a thinker, activist, writer, musicologist, linguist, organizer, teacher, and freedom fighter of unparalleled eminence and boldness, but you were so much more than that. You were a molder, an inter-weaver of countless Bengali minds and identities.

...Rita

SYED BADRUL HAQUE