

NOTES FROM HISTORY

The times of General Ziaur Rahman

EDITORIAL DESK

ON May 30, 1981, Lt. Gen. Ziaur Rahman, president of Bangladesh and its first military ruler, was assassinated in Chittagong. He had earlier survived eighteen attempted coups d'etat. It was to the nineteenth attempt that he succumbed. His body lay in the room of the Circuit House, where he had been lodged, until the plotters took it away along with the bodies of two other officers, and buried them in unmarked graves. A few days later, the graves were located and Zia's body was transported to Dhaka, to be buried beside the Crescent Lake in the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar area. Tens of thousands of people attended his funeral.

Zia's had been an unexpected and meteoric rise in the history of independent Bangladesh. As a major in the

Pakistan army, he had been involved in the unloading of weapons and other military hardware at Chittagong port in March 1971 when the Pakistan army launched its genocide against the seventy five million Bengalis of what was then known as East Pakistan. It needed no prompting for Zia to know what he needed to do, even if in the early moments of the crisis he was unable to come to a decision. Once he did decide which way to go, he lost no time in taking action. He eliminated his Pakistani senior officer, and then, on March 27, he spoke to a confused and panicky Bengali nation over the clandestine Shwadhin Bangla Biplobi Betar Kendro. Zia declared Bangladesh's independence on behalf of, in his words: "Our great national leader, our supreme commander Sheikh Mujibur Rahman." That was in

the dying moments of March 27, 1971. After that, Zia went off to wage, with scores of other Bengali officers and hundreds of Bengali soldiers, a war of national liberation.

During the war, Zia commanded the force that came to bear the first initial of his name, the Z force. Together with Khaled Musharraf's K Force and K.M. Shafullah's S Force, Zia's troops devised a guerrilla strategy against the occupation Pakistan army. Following Bangladesh's liberation on December 16, 1971, Zia, promoted to the rank of colonel, was appointed deputy chief of staff of the new Bangladesh army under the chief of staff, Col. K.M. Shafullah. Subsequently, the two men were promoted to the rank of major general. In mid-1972, Zia wrote what would turn out to be a well-read article in the



Bengali weekly journal Bichitra, where he enunciated the story of the war of liberation inspired by the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman.

The assassination of the Father of the Nation on August 15, 1975, propelled Zia into a new, necessarily productive course. The Khondokar Moshtaque regime removed Shafullah from his position and appointed Zia as the new chief of army staff. But Zia's failure to re-establish the chain of command in the army, broken by the majors and colonels who had murdered Mujib and toppled his government, led to action by Brig. Khaled Musharraf.

On November 3, 1975, Zia was placed under house arrest and his position was taken by Musharraf, who had himself promoted to major-general. Four days later, soldiers led by Col. Abu Taher ousted Musharraf, murdered him and his associates, and freed Zia from confinement.

By the end of the month, however, Zia moved against Taher and had him taken into custody when it emerged that Taher was trying to bring about a leftist orientation in the military. Taher, a hero of the liberation war, was tried by a secret military tribunal on charges of sedition and hanged in July 1976.

After that, Zia went on to assume the office of Bangladesh's president upon the resignation of Justice Abu Sadat Muhammad Sayem in April 1977. He organised a referendum and had himself confirmed as head of state and government. In June 1978, despite holding the office of army chief of staff, he took part in a presidential election organised by his regime. He defeated his former commander in chief, retired general Muhammad Ataul Ghani Osmany,

and in February of the following year held elections to the Jatiyo Sangsad. In September 1979, Zia formed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. He ensured the incorporation of an indemnity ordinance, earlier promulgated by the Moshtaque regime, into the constitution, thus making it legally impossible for the assassins of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the four leaders of the Mujibnagar government to be tried for their criminality. He then took the unprecedented step of appointing a number of the assassins to diplomatic positions at Bangladesh's missions abroad.

Among the positive steps he took was the restoration of the publication of newspapers earlier banned when one-party Baksal system was imposed on the country in January 1975. It is

also to Zia's credit that he restored multi-party democracy in the country. In the Zia era, steps were first taken for changes in the economy to be made. Initiatives were for the first time taken to propel the state controlled economy towards a developing private sector.

General Zia is also credited for originally articulating the idea of a commonality of approach to political and social issues in the South Asian region. From that perspective, he is generally regarded as the man who envisioned the setting up of what would later come to be known as Saarc. As president, Zia toured the length and breadth of the country, promoting, despite a number of questions, such concepts as his canal digging program.

Price hike, inflation, and price control

MAMUN RASHID

WITH the price increase of essentials capturing headlines of our national newspapers almost everyday, there has been no shortage of soul-searching for finding the reasons and no shortage of "economists" to suggest numerous solutions to a government desperately looking for means to curb a headline inflation.

These suggestions typically lack an understanding of the economic fundamentals of a growing nation. Some of these were suggesting that Bangladesh Bank should influence the banks to get more small importers enter into the import of essential commodities, the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh should be revitalized, salary of the government servants should be increased, etc.

If the international prices of these commodities increase by themselves, can the small importers or the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) import at a lower price and thereby offer a lower price to the consumers. In this context, I would like to humbly remind my readers that price rise is a

consequence of rise of same items in the international market, less domestic production, too many people engaged in the trade/supply chain in the form of pseudo-employment and each one of them trying to earn some margin, no subsidy or association at the growers level unlike many other countries, less number of wholesale outlets and USD/BDT price in the local market, along with fuel price hike and discipline brought in by the task force on movement of goods (the 5 ton trucks can no more carry 10 ton goods). It is worthwhile mentioning that some amount (optimum level) of inflation might not be bad for the economy for employment generation and growth.

Export itself, such as increase in exports of fish, meat and vegetables to non-resident Bangladeshis may significantly contribute towards increase of price of those items in the local market thereby increasing inflation, but that does not mean we should stop giving subsidy to those items or discourage exports. The "easy money" holders also contribute significantly to inflation by buying items at

inflated prices.

At the same time, the major importers of essentials did not become a cartel at their own will, situation has rather made them come into this position. In today's world of complex purchase economics, the whole commodity market in the world has entered into a bulk import phase. Besides, commercial banks cannot be forced to open L/Cs for the smaller importers. This is partly because the small enterprises are prone to market shocks and cannot sustain in the long term unless they acquire the scale.

On the other hand, our development partners will not allow any market distortions to be brought in, by forcing the banks to open L/Cs of small traders who do not measure up on the basis of commercial merit. This is not to say that vulnerable group support cannot continue, with law enforcing agencies such as Home Ministry, NBR, and Bangladesh Bank being more vigilant, but any kind of "control" march might give a wrong signal to the international community who wants us to further liberalize import regime. Moreover,

our experience with Trading Corporation of Bangladesh, which only chooses the lowest bidder, was very bad with regard to import of cement, sugar, onion, and aluminum ingot, and when the question came for "market stabilization." Let us explore some of the underlying reasons of price increase below.

Globally, price level has increased, imports have become costlier and increase in fuel prices in the local market has further stimulated the price hike. These are all realities and we have to live with it. We should not increase the expectation of a private sector led economy. Probing the private sector inefficient, questioning their integrity, and thereby taking over the import activities do not help flourish business. We have seen import permit business long ago, which also did not help towards the efforts for lowering of domestic prices or to consolidate the position of small importers, rather questions of import of substandard products were raised. The prices of onion, sugar, garlic have come down a bit recently, this was obviously due to imports at competitive prices and part elimination of fats in the supply chain, and improvement of law and order situation. We must get comfortable with the fact that prices will rise as well as fall.

The farmers need more support. The United States

is not increasing (rather agricultural land is decreasing at the rate of 1% every year).

If we look at the way governance works in the developed countries, the government is mostly involved in the policy formulation. It is not the government's job to interfere in day-to-day activities of a private sector led economy. Probing the private sector inefficient, questioning their integrity, and thereby taking over the import activities do not help flourish business. We have seen import permit business long ago, which also did not help towards the efforts for lowering of domestic prices or to consolidate the position of small importers, rather questions of import of substandard products were raised. The prices of onion, sugar, garlic have come down a bit recently, this was obviously due to imports at competitive prices and part elimination of fats in the supply chain, and improvement of law and order situation. We must get comfortable with the fact that prices will rise as well as fall.

The farmers need more support. The United States

government provides supports/subsidies directly at the farmers end. To implement the same in Bangladesh, we need registration of farmers and setting up of growers' associations. This will help farmers, modernize farming, and allow them to reach the market place directly, thereby eliminating the intervention of middlemen.

The business of middlemen has been found to be increasing the cost of commodities. Unemployment has played a role in this case. People without proper jobs have got engaged in the distribution and supply chains, creating multiple layers within a single process. It creates pseudo-employment without adding much value.

Resultantly, more than required number of stakeholders has been created and these people are interested in their own margins/cuts. The consumers end up paying for the income of all the middlemen who look for survival margin. While the middlemen cannot be eliminated overnight (it can create havoc if we can't find them alternate job/employment), the

government can oversee their activities through law enforcing agencies and tax officials.

Marginalization of small operators will take place in a market economy; it is obvious that smarter players will replace inefficient operators. Hence, an efficient market grows up through an evolution process. The large enterprises of Bangladesh and the world have become large because of their inherent qualities. Leaders come up through the same process. And people or institutions without the inherent quality and urge to survive will fail, this is the hard truth.

The best way to run a market economy is to let it run on its own. The best way to intervene in a market economy is to work through it as its part and parcel, rather than creating selective distortions. Small importers cannot do wholesale commodity imports because they lack the capacity to operate at an efficient economic scale. TCB cannot control prices or break syndicates by importing on its own, but will succeed in inducing temporary distortions in the market for the benefit of no one.

So, what should we do

now? Speak the truth! Prices of the essentials have gone up in the international market and it is not due to any mishandling on the part of the government. If the government allows itself to be blamed, it will create the perfect ground for opportunistic segments to ask for discounts and cutting corners with the rules.

What if the people do not understand the reasons for price hike? Speak the truth, again! And keep telling the truth, not the half-truth, the whole truth. There is no other alternative for the government because it does not control the prices of commodities in the international market, nor can it absolutely ensure bumper agricultural production, other than giving policy support, timely supply of inputs, where appropriate and in the appropriate manner.



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EC secretariat: Past and present

BURHANUDDIN AHMED

BEFORE the dismemberment of Pakistan, the election secretariat was independent of the government, and had the status of a ministry. Not only this, it was also outside the purview of the Public Service Commission for the purpose of recruitment and promotion of its officers and staff.

All appointments and promotions of officers under the secretariat used to be made by the chief election commissioner. The government had no say whatsoever in any matters connected therewith.

In matters of appointment and promotion, the chief election commissioner was guided by the provisions contained in the rules framed by it, pursuant to the authority delegated to it under Article 154 of the Constitution promulgated in 1962. The decision of the Bangladesh government was that the former central government servants would enjoy the same status, and would continue to be governed by the same rules as were applicable to them before

liberation.

The status and terms and conditions of service of the officers of the secretariat of the commission, constituted with the nucleus of the Provincial Election Commission of erstwhile East Pakistan, were thus fully protected by this general order of the Bangladesh government.

After liberation, the officers of the secretariat of the commission continued to be governed by the said rules with necessary changes. Despite this fact, a group within the government was actively trying to close it down on the plea that the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh did not provide for creation of an independent secretariat by the Election Commission.

To support this contention, they referred to the provision under Article 120 of the Constitution, which says that the president shall, when so requested by the commission, make available to it such staff as may be necessary for the discharge of its functions.

The staff referred to under Article

120 of the Constitution obviously means the casual and temporary staff drafted by the commission on the eve of each general or by-election, to act as returning officers, assistant returning officers, presiding officers, assistant presiding officers and polling officers during the polls, and not the permanent officers of the Election Commission secretariat.

In spite of this fact, an order was passed by a very powerful joint secretary of the Establishment Division to vacate the government accommodation under the occupation of the Election Commission Secretariat, without giving due notice, to make room for another organisation much less important than the Election Commission and its secretariat.

Consequently, the commission approached Dr. Kamal Hossain, the then law minister of the Bangladesh government, for help. He at once made a phone call to the joint secretary and told him not to disturb the EC Secretariat till an alternative accommodation could be found. This jolt was soon followed by

another, more serious in nature.

The Ministry of Finance and the Establishment Division questioned the functioning of the commission's secretariat as a ministry. They refused, at one stage, to entertain any proposal direct from the commission's secretariat and advised it to send its proposal to them through the parliamentary affairs division, treating the EC as an attached department of that division.

The EC, for valid reasons, did not succumb to this illegal and unreasonable pressure for curtailing the independence granted to it by the law of the land. The newly appointed chief election commissioner, Justice Mohammad Idrees, accompanied by his veteran deputy secretary, Mr. Shamsuddin Ahmed, saw the then prime minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and apprised him of the difficulties created for the Election Commission by the Finance Ministry and the Establishment Division, and requested an early solution to enable him to discharge his constitutional obligation.

After giving a patient hearing,

the then prime minister passed an instant order that the EC secretariat shall continue to enjoy the status granted to it by the former central government, and correspond directly with all ministries and divisions.

He also asked his secretary to send copies of that order to all ministries and divisions for information and guidance. The status and privileges of the secretariat were, thus, protected by the prime minister of the country.

The EC secretariat enjoyed full and complete independence, and other privileges, with the status of a ministry during the period 1956 to March 1981. But the final and decisive blow to its independence came during the autocratic regime established by overthrowing the elected and democratic government of Justice Abdus Sattar.

This autocratic regime, soon after assuming power, constituted a committee for the purpose of reorganizing the administrative set-up of the country. This committee, in the name of bringing the officers of the EC secretariat into

the mainstream of the cadre service, recommended its placement as a division under the president.

Consequently, the Commission's secretariat lost the independence enjoyed by it over a period of long 17 years (1956 to 1981) and became subservient to the government. The illogical and abrupt change in the independent status of the secretariat has affected the independence of the Commission very adversely, to the detriment of free, fair and impartial elections.

The arrangement made on the recommendation of the Enam committee deprived the Election Commission of the authority that it used to exercise over its secretariat since its inception in 1956. The Commission was virtually reduced to the position of a lame duck by the said arrangement.

Having been fully convinced of the ill effects of the continuance of the EC secretariat under the prime minister, the lovers of democracy and the promoters of free, fair and impartial elections have been shouting themselves hoarse for long for separation of the EC secre-

tariat from the prime minister's control so as to bring it back to its previous position. The caretaker government is yet to respond to this popular and genuine demand positively and favourably.

The observation of the chief election commissioner, made on April 26 while exchanging views with the leaders of the civil society organisations in the NEC conference room, was a clear manifestation of some confusion even within the commission itself as to the method of separation of its secretariat from the prime minister's secretariat.

The chief election commissioner was, perhaps, of the view that separation would not be possible without amending the Constitution, which was beyond the ambit of the caretaker government. This perception seems to be incorrect. It shall not call for amendment of the Constitution, because, the commission secretariat was tagged to the prime minister's secretariat not by amending the rules of business through an

administrative order issued by the cabinet division.

The caretaker government is, therefore, fully competent to separate at any time the EC secretariat from the prime minister's secretariat, and replace the same under the administrative control of the EC.

The caretaker government has by this time taken a number of measures to promote the cause of democracy, as well as for holding a free, fair and impartial election. The lovers and the promoters of pure democracy, therefore, expect that the caretaker government, in the interest of a free, fair and impartial election, shall rise to the occasion and take immediate measures to free the EC secretariat from the influence of the government without further loss of time. This will undoubtedly be a great service to the cause of democracy.

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He's back

LARRY KAPLOW

SHIITE Muslim cleric Moqtada al-Sadr made a dramatic return today to the public stage from wherever he had been hiding. After about four months out of sight, he picked an opportune time to show his might and sound his message to a movement that seems to feed off Iraq's protracted chaos.

Sadr climbed the minbar, or pulpit, of the large Kufa mosque for Friday prayers while the city was under complete and open control of Sadr's Mahdi Army militia (traffic police were the only government forces in view). His bodyguards, in beige business suits with earphones in place, stood by and his three convoys, including BMWs with tinted glass, were on hand to provide an exit and decoys.

True to form, he took after the United States and called for an end to the American presence in Iraq. Also, Sadr said he decided to "advise" the Mahdi Army to avoid conflict with Iraqi police and the

army and to use peaceful tactics, though that does not indicate any call for disarming his loyalists.

But he also sounded themes that could come into play in coming weeks. He reached out to Sunni Muslims: "I specifically refer to our brothers the Iraqi Sunnis, (and say) that the occupier made a division between us and them in order to weaken the Iraqi people."

He issued a soft threat against an Iraqi government in which his own partisans were members just weeks ago, warning it to improve services like water and electricity: "If the government does not try to provide them, we will change our position, knowing that providing the services will enhance the security situation that the government claims to be trying to achieve."

A year ago, Sadr seated six ministers in the cabinet of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, apparently ready to build patronage and support doling out welfare and jobs. But as the government showed itself to be more and more ineffective, the ministers pulled out, and now Sadr's statements

appear to position him as a kind of opposition figure who can voice the mass's dissatisfaction with power outages, water shortages, car bombs and corruption.

His call for Shiite-Sunni unity, also not new, comes as his leadership has been holding meetings with Sunni representatives, who consider themselves Iraqi nationalists. Sadr has also portrayed himself as a nationalist -- an indigenous Shiite figure compared to Iranian-backed rivals who were in exile during Saddam Hussein's regime.

Like leading Sunnis, Sadr's faction wants a strong central government and hopes for local elections this year -- in which they're expected to do well in some areas. Some hope he sticks to these goals and becomes a figure for reconciliation.

An expanding vacuum at the top of Iraqi politics also makes this a ripe time for an emergence by the cleric. Prime Minister Maliki is bogged down in a sweeping security operation that has not impressed most Iraqis and is tied up on legislative battles over how

to share national oil revenues and amend the Constitution.

One of Sadr's primary competitors for the hearts of religious Shiites is on the sidelines. Cleric Abdul Aziz Hakim, who leads the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, one of the major powers in the government, is reportedly being treated for lung cancer in Iran. Iraqi President Jalal Talabani is in the United States for medical care. Sadr, said to be in his 30s, appeared energetic despite the already wilting Iraqi heat.

Sadr's forces fought -- and died -- in great numbers against US troops in 2004 and 2005. They are widely accused of sectarian attacks since the bombing of the beloved Shiite Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006. But he is also working the political track.

One of the aides who escorted Sadr into the mosque was Nassar al-Rubaie, a Sadr politician who helped gather signatures from more than half the Parliament demanding a timetable for a US withdrawal from Iraq.

Crowds were emotional and

large -- a few thousand -- but not overflowing for the cleric's reappearance in Kufa, close to the Shiite holy city of Najaf. His return had been erroneously rumored on Fridays past, and many remained skeptical this time. When he did show, the decoy convoys weren't the only mysteries Sadr cultivated.

US officials claim he has been in Iran since the start of the Baghdad security plan in February. Sadr's people have given conflicting accounts of where he has been, and he did not address the issue when he spoke in the mosque. Some of Sadr's forces have tried to lay low during the increased US operations, and others are splintering off to continue their attacks on US forces and Sunnis.

But as Iraq's turmoil continues, its political leadership falters and its people become more desperate, the biggest mystery of all remains what the cleric plans to do next with all his options.



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