

A study of failure, frustration or inability?

Political repression was high and the Rakhi Bahini was created, some said to protect Mujib from a restive military and to have a force under his direct command. It behaved much like the RAB of today, picking up and disappearing people, which made it the most feared symbol of state and its unaccountable power.

A few became rich dramatically, and most didn't, which made the matter worse, and when by 1974 Mujib imposed emergency rule, soon to be followed by one-party rule, the situation was deplorable. Rarely had one man who had reached so high come down so low. What the rogue group of soldiers did on August 15, 1975 was more a physical elimination of the person. But the Mujib of the first history had not been in evidence since soon after he returned from Pakistan in early 1972.

The Mujib that Zia contested after Mujib's death was a man without much history, and, that too, the history of a failed administrator. It is by linking the two Mujibs that our confusions start about his role, worth, and failings. It is about Mujib and his multiplicity. 1971 was a break between one Mujib and another, something mostly ignored. That is how the memories get mixed and also live on, causing friction without any historical basis.

The puzzling autocrat

One puzzle about Mujib is how could a person who was the champion of constitutional democracy become a politician who dealt the worst blow possible by installing not just one-party rule but also backing extra-judicial killing, custodial death, arbitrary arrest, torture, harassment, and the rest of it.

Is this something his history contributed to? Mujib was a product of a historical continuity that began long ago in pre-1947 India, where the party he belonged to, the Muslim League of India, had no internal democracy either. The records of the 1946 elections of India which more or less delivered Pakistan (and are also called the Pakistan referendum elections) show the intense internal conflict with Jinnah's autocracy.

Prof. Harun Rashid, who has covered much of that phase in his book *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh,* has shown the imposing nature of central leadership that made party practices very undemocratic. This culture was transmitted through the Bengali version of the same party, namely in the Awami Muslim League, after 1947. Subsequently, when the party broke up into NAP and AL, the Bhashani version had to physically fend off attacks when they tried to hold their first Congress in Dhaka when AL thugs attacked the meeting.

The point is simple. Where did Mujib ever come across internal political party democracy that he would learn from, let alone practice? Mujib came from a tradition of non-democracy, and other parties in the political zone, including the Left parties, were never democratic, either. To ask Mujib to be democratic when no one else was is unfair. It is just that after 1971, the same tendencies became public, and, since the party was in power, the effects were felt by and visible to the people. Hence the puzzle about his undemocratic behaviour despite his alleged democratic roots.

Evidence would point to a man who thought the objective was more important than the process -- and this was the dominant political tradition in Bengal. Since no party other than the descendants of the mother party -- Bengal Muslim League -- came to power, the political culture never changed.

The current situation, where both AL and BNP are resisting attempts to introduce reforms relating to internal democracy, is a good example of how deep the Undemocratic roots are. The activities of the present government to facilitate political change in parties while being in the administration is also part of the Pakistan tradition, where bureaucrats have always thought that politics should be managed from the Government House. They display the power of traditions.