

The nationalist that was Mujib

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SYED ABUL MAKSUD

EMINENT scientist Professor Abdus Salam had been invited by the then Islamic Academy, Dhaka to give a lecture on religion and nationalism a couple of months before the presidential election in 1964. The Academy was housed in an old two-storey abandoned building. That house was demolished to construct Bailul Mokarram shopping complex in the late sixties. My friend Ahmed Safa, the late writer, and I attended the lecture.

After the seminar was over, the Director of the Islamic Academy, Abul Hashim, a politician and thinker, was chatting with Dr. Salam and some other distinguished persons including Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah and Dr. Qudrat-e-Khuda. All on a sudden, Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Dr. Mofazzar Ahmed Chowdhury, a reader in the political science department at the University of Dhaka, showed up on the veranda of the Islamic Academy. Seeing Prof. Salam and Abul Hashim in the auditorium, they joined them. It was a Sunday morning. Perhaps they had gone to Awami League office, opposite the Academy, for party work. We were listening to their conversation from a considerable distance.

Almost all major political parties in East Pakistan had been supporting "provincial autonomy." Their idea of autonomy was some kind of "political autonomy." But Maulana Bhasani and Sheikh Mujib's concept of autonomy was different from that of other Bengali leaders. They demanded full provincial autonomy and an "autonomous economy" for East Bengal.

I still remember the gist of this informal conversation. Speaking on the provincial autonomy, Sheikh shaheb pointed out the disparity between the two wings of

Pakistan. He quoted from Dr. Mahbubul Huq's newly published Strategy of Economic Planning in Pakistan, and said that in order to redress the economic disparity between the two wings it was necessary to dismantle the central Planning Commission to create two powerful regional planning bodies. He emphatically said that the region should have the authority to tax, and the power to make fiscal and monetary policy on its own. So far as I can recollect, Dr. Salam endorsed the views of Sheikh Mujib. Bangabandhu further said that the provinces should have the power to form foreign policy and conduct foreign relations. It was two years before the announcement of his Six Points.

By the early 1960s, Sheikh Mujib was known to all as the standard-bearer of Bengali nationalism. It was the period of military dictatorship of Field Marshal Ayub Khan. Sheikh Mujib was his greatest opponent. He fought relentlessly for the revival of democracy in Pakistan and provincial autonomy for East Pakistan. From the nationalist and from the conservative standpoint, his role in power politics was unparalleled.

In 1963, Sheikh Mujib went to London to consult with his ailing political guru, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, who was in self-exile. The two had detailed discussions on the political situation prevailing in Pakistan. Mujib didn't like foreign involvement in achieving the rights of the people of East Pakistan.

Suhrawardy wrote in his unfinished memoirs: "Mujib has doubts that national unity and national integration will solve the problems of East Pakistan. He is not interested in the field of foreign politics as he does not believe that any foreign country should become deeply committed here; East Pakistan must work out its own destiny. Hence, there is no point seeking

foreign political involvement." [Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, p.71]

After the death of Suhrawardy in December 1963, it became difficult to keep the party together. Ataur Rahman Khan was a gentleman politician. He had neither courage nor charisma. Neither he nor any other leader had any command over the younger leaders and workers. At that crucial time, Mujib took over the helm of the party. Sheikh Mujib not only led the Awami League, but also led the nation to independence in seven years.

After liberation, Bangabandhu had to tackle multifarious problems. He faced severe opposition from various quarters at home and abroad. Anti-liberation parties like Jamat-e-Islami, Muslim League and Nezam-e-Islam, which were banned by the government, and other reactionary forces, communal elements, and underground ultra-Left outfits went on with their conspiracy and anti-government propaganda. The political and social elite did not cooperate with the government. Because of economic hardship the ordinary people were frustrated. In the meantime, creation of Baksal -- one-party rule -- angered the Western capitalist bloc.

The Bangladesh liberation war got active support from the Soviet Union and its East European allies. Both the US and the Soviet Union were trying to gain influence in the impoverished nation. The influence of US was more than that of the USSR as the US was able to pour in more aid and assistance and its intelligence was more efficient and pro-active. Pakistani intelligence was also active and got support from the US. China and Muslim countries were against the Bangladesh freedom movement because of India's total support to Bangladesh. In these circumstances, Bangabandhu had become a victim.

The people of Bangladesh had experienced the military coups of Ayub and



Bangabandhu bids farewell to Indira Gandhi at Tejgaon airport in March 1972.

Yahya Khan. Both were bloodless. But the August 15 coup was the worst possible military savagery.

Who killed Sheikh Mujib? Dalim-Faruk and others in the army were mercenaries. And Mushtaq? Brutus was better.

Samar Sen, an astute diplomat, was India's high commissioner to Bangladesh in 1975. He saw the political developments in Bangladesh from close quarters. Twenty-three years after the coup, Sen told the Frontline journalist Sukumar Muralidharan in 1998: "We had been keeping in touch with all elements within Bangladesh. India's intelligence services -- whose operations few of us know much about -- retained contact even with elements hostile to Sheikh Mujib. He felt that these contacts were uncalled for and asked us to stop them. We did so. As a result, until the time of the coup, we had no idea that things had deteriorated quite so badly. In retrospect, it is clear that the August coup, apart from being a rude awakening, was perhaps a logical outcome of the situation

of chaos that prevailed." The August 15 military action was a coup with a difference. It changed, among other things, the secular and democratic character of Bangladesh.

I saw Bangabandhu for the first time in 1954 on the banks of the mighty Padma at Aricha ghat. The last I saw him was in the Bangabhaban Darbar Hall on July 31, 1975. To him, personal relationship was very important. He maintained excellent relations with his opponents and adversaries. Two weeks before the 1973 elections, National Awami Party chairman Maulana Bhasani was admitted to PG Hospital. Bangabandhu rushed to visit him. Hearing the voice of Bangabandhu, the Maulana sat up from the bed. Bhasani touched the hands of Mujib and wished him all success in the election. He stressed on "a stable government" under his premiership.

While in the IPGMR, the Maulana did not have the chance to eat any food supplied by the hospital. Admirers sent homemade food for him. Begum Fazilatunnesa

Mujib herself went or sent somebody to the hospital almost everyday with big tiffin-carriers. She cooked small fish curries with hot green chilly and spices to the taste of the Maulana. This gesture of the Mujibs annoyed the leaders and candidates of NAP.

I would like to cite another anecdote. A couple of months before the August tragedy, poet Jasimuddin asked me: "Bhai, could you accompany me to Dhanmondi? I've an urgent talk with Bangabandhu." I gladly agreed. So far as I can recollect, the rickshawalla demanded taka two. It was exorbitant. The poet got angry. He haggled with the rickshaw-puller over the fair and hired the rickshaw from Bangladesh Bank to Bangabandhu Bhavan for taka one and a-half.

On reaching Bangabandhu Bhavan, the poet paid and patted the rickshawalla and walked straight to the drawing room. I followed him. Bangabandhu came down from the first floor. The two great Bengalis exchanged warm greetings and sat down on a sofa.

The poet said: "You're from Faridpur, I'm also from Faridpur (district). I've come to you for a tadbir (a favour). My son-in-law is your son-in-law. Isn't it?" "Of course," Bangabandhu laughed and quipped: "Your son-in-law (meyerjama) is my son-in-law. I do understand what you want to say. You and Bhabi should not worry for Maudud. He is alright in jail. He will be released as soon as possible. I'm giving the order."

Then they chatted for some time. The poet was highly gratified by the gesture of the president and supreme leader of the nation. Bangabandhu knew very well that the palli-kavi shouldn't be entertained with tea or coffee. So, he asked his servant to serve him with muri, gur (molasses) and coconut -- favourites of the poet.

This was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. As a politician and statesman, he was not above mistakes or follies. As a mortal human being, he had his weaknesses and limitations. History will absolve all his mistakes and weaknesses. As the independence hero and nationalist leader, he is second to none.

Syed Abul Maksud is a noted writer, researcher and columnist.

Basically a people's man

ZAHID HOSSAIN

ON this day in 1975, the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated and the nation should be ashamed of the unpardonable failure of not being able to finish the trial processes of the killers even after the lapse of 34 years since his gruesome killing.

This is very unfortunate for the nation that the man who materialised a thousand years' dream of the Bengalee nation for a homeland through a long and arduous struggle without bothering about jail and torture, had to die along with most of his family members at the hands of some disgruntled Bengali army officers. Even the trial processes of the killers could not be completed because of some well known political reasons.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, despite being the undisputed leader of the nation, was basically a people's man. His unprecedented popularity had never tainted his pure love for ordinary men and women, who make up the majority of the population. He was the creation of the people and he never had forgotten the real source of his strength: people's love. The pull of people's love was so strong that he continued to live in his Road 32 Dhanmondi house which was poorly protected even after he became the country's most powerful prime minister.

Even though his decision to stay in that

house proved fatal, he would not have changed his mind had he been alive even this day. His love for the people was like water for fish. He could not have lived a life of his choice without being close to the people -- away from them inside a heavily guarded fortress. His unmatched concern for his people had made him as great a leader as he was.

As in other fields of political art and culture, Bangabandhu was equally brilliant as a parliamentarian. The role he played in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan as well as in the National Assembly amply demonstrated his skillfulness and efficiency as a parliamentarian. As a parliamentarian he never failed to raise his voice to highlight the problems and sufferings of the downtrodden people particularly of the oppressed and subjugated people of the then East Pakistan. The major issues of his concern in the parliamentary debate were Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan, provincial autonomy, joint electorate, safety and preventive detention acts, freedom of press and freedom of expression, right to form political parties and trade unions, separation of judiciary from the executive and parity in services and in all matters between the two parts of Pakistan.

In a country like Pakistan where martial law administrators generally have had the major say in its socio-political matters, it was Bangabandhu who showed the guts to declare in the Constituent

Assembly on February 17, 1956 that martial law or emergency could be declared only with the approval of the national assembly. It was again he who pleaded for two capitals for a country like Pakistan -- one at Karachi and the other at Dhaka.

Bangabandhu in his discussion on the draft constitution in the Constituent Assembly on February 6, 1956 demanded a separation of the judiciary from the executive. He emphatically pointed out that this would ensure justice. While pleading the case for separating judiciary from the executive within a period of two years, he said, "If any government cannot separate judiciary from the executive within two years, such a government must immediately resign. People will have no confidence in that government, because it is not an efficient government."

However, for a new born country like Bangladesh, it would have been difficult for any leader to carry on his shoulder the unfulfilled aspirations of its people accumulated over so many years. Never having exercised effective state power, Bangabandhu was expected to learn the rules of governance from its practice. He had to secure recognition for such a newly earned independent state achieved through a nine-month war of independence which actually emerged out of the break up of a sovereign state. He had to rebuild an economy immobilised not just by war, but by its delinking from "institutions at the centre which had for 24 years

run its finances, central banking, planning and foreign affairs.

The country had to cope with the overnight withdrawal of Pakistani businessmen who had dominated private industry, commerce, banking, insurance, inland waterways, shipping, foreign and regional trade. It faced an economy physically dislocated by war with 10 million refugees seeking immediate rehabilitation. With its communication network destroyed, bridges and infrastructure damaged, power system down, ports blocked by sunken wrecks, all foreign trade disrupted, factories closed, inventories low and disruption in the planting of two successive crops, the country needed a strong guiding force and an instant rehabilitation strategy.

Given the circumstances of its birth, the record of the post liberation government of Sheikh Mujib was of quality by any standard. Within a year the government had secured diplomatic recognition from all countries of the world except China and Saudi Arabia, which remained specially committed to Pakistan. Within two years after liberation Bangladesh had become a member of the United Nations and had been recognised by Pakistan. In February 1974 on the occasion of the first summit of Islamic countries Bangabandhu, who had just over two years ago been on trial for treason to Pakistan, was being presented arms by contingents of the Pakistan army at Lahore Airport with the Bangladesh national anthem being played

by the army band.

Within a period of two years the government of Sheikh Mujib had laid the foundation of a central government which had the basis of a national administration, built up a foreign ministry, laid the foundation of the armed forces, established a central banking system, founded a planning commission which could publish the first five-year plan within two years and framed a democratic constitution on the basis of which election could be held in March, 1973.

However, things changed and very soon he realised that he was not being able to implement his plans, his ideas into reality. There were enemies within and without; the enemies created rift in the party. In the midst of nation-building efforts his idealism remained untarnished but the self-seeking enemies promoted and encouraged by those who never accepted the reality of a sovereign country for the Bengalees, hatched the murderous plot and assassinated him on the fateful night of August 15, 1975.

The story of a nation that began in his mind years ago remained unfulfilled. The common people for whom he fought and suffered the whole life and dreamt for creating Sonar Bangla for a peaceful, happy and decent life for them still remains a dream. Nonetheless the political legacy he nurtured will remain on the footprints of time. The country he created will be here forever and his ideals, philosophies and inspiring speeches will



Bangabandhu with his parents.



continue to guide us for ever and lead us to peace, prosperity and happiness.

Zahid Hossain is a political analyst.

Bangabandhu remembered

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

AS a child in the early sixties I first heard of Bangabandhu from my father. He spoke affectionately of a gentleman named Sheikh Mujib, who gave fiery speeches in the Paltan Maidan against Pakistani military dictator Ayub Khan and his henchman Monem Khan, the governor of East Pakistan. He was brave as well as witty and was fond of East Bengal (East Pakistan) and her people to a fault. Fighting for the rights of his deprived people was the greatest passion of his life. Often he went to jail. But my father was not sure if Sheikh Shaheb would be finally successful and come to power one day to establish the democratic rule in Pakistan and serve its suffering people, especially those of East Pakistan. Needless to mention I instantly began to like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, simply because no one else championed the Bengali cause like him. I started to follow his activities through newspapers. Along with Brazilian football, West Indian cricket and sub-continental hockey, a child of

the sixties began to admire Sheikh Mujib. Slowly but surely he became my favourite politician. By March 1971 Bangladesh and Sheikh Mujib became synonyms.

The Bengalis of East Pakistan accepted the famous six-point program of the Awami League from the core of their heart. The program was announced in 1966 and claimed political autonomy for the provinces. The disparity between East and West Pakistan should be removed and the economy of the eastern province needed to be specially looked after. As a fifth grader I just understood that the six points wanted to address the suffering of the people of East Bengal very seriously. Even at that age we clearly felt that the West Pakistanis looked down upon us. Slowly and surely Sheikh Mujib grew in stature. The Pakistani military regime was frightened of him too. They committed the great mistake from their point of view - of taking him into custody for the so-called Agartala conspiracy case. The Pakistani rulers' calculation was wrong. They thought that their sycophants were the majority. The true



Bangabandhu at UN General Assembly in September 1974.

picture was different. The Bengalis didn't fail to recognize their greatest nationalist leader and supported him wholeheartedly. To them Sheikh Mujib was not a traitor who wanted to break up Pakistan. Rather he was the true patriot fighting for the rights of his people. The students and the

common people took the 1969 movement for democracy to great heights and it achieved full success. The Pakistani rulers had to release Sheikh Mujib from jail. Ayub Khan had to leave handing over power to the army chief Yahya Khan, who was quick to promise early elections. The chief judge of the

so-called Agartala conspiracy case fled through the back door of his court room. He couldn't even put his shoes on when thousands attacked the building housing his court.

Bangabandhu's Awami League won 167 out of 169 seats of the East Pakistan assembly. This made him the leader of the biggest party in the whole of Pakistan. The election was conducted by the military regime of Yahya Khan and was absolutely fair. The rulers simply couldn't judge properly the popularity of Bangabandhu. Yahya Khan rightfully called him the future Prime minister of Pakistan. But Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who won 80 plus seats in West Pakistan, conspired with Yahya and his generals to start the post-election unfair game. They put thorns on Sheikh Mujib's path. The West Pakistanis were in power for 24 years since Pakistan's birth. How could they give up power so easily? So, they very wrongfully decided to dishonour the clear popular verdict given to the charismatic Bangabandhu by his people. Yahya Khan cancelled the national assembly session he had called earlier.

Yahya Khan and his aides

came to Dhaka for a dialogue with Bangabandhu and Awami League. Apparently they carried on the talks seriously. The whole nation waited eagerly for a positive outcome. But Yahya, advised by Bhutto, decided not to finish the talks and be treacherous. He and his government went for a military crackdown on the night of March 25, 1971. Thousands of innocent civilians were killed in one night. Bangabandhu ordered for a total war of independence, hints of which he has given in his historic speech of March 07 at the Suhrawardy Udyan. He himself courted arrest to save Dhaka from total destruction but directed his close aides to form a government and carry on our war of independence to final success. He knew that he had united the whole nation and freedom from Pakistani rule was not far away.

We fought our noble war of liberation in the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Bangladesh's women prayed for his release from jail and our people fought heroically for independence. The government-in-exile of Syed Nazrul Islam, Taiuddin Ahmed,

Mansur Ali, Qamruzzaman and others guided the nation in its crisis with wisdom, sincerity and sacrifice. The governments of India and Soviet Union were our great friends in 1971. We Bengalis proved to the whole world that we were a heroic nation and the leader who turned us into a confident and united nation was none else than Bangabandhu himself. Our losses were great but we were a free nation. Our future generations would not be colonial citizens any more.

As a ruler Bangabandhu had to build the war-ravaged country from zero. That was not an easy task. The most powerful nation in the world was against our independence and their government was yet to forgive Bangabandhu. They had planted men in politics, journalism, the civil service and the armed forces. So they successfully created a distance between Bangabandhu and some of his most trusted men. There were impediments here and there. Despite his best efforts, our great leader had failure as well as success. But he certainly didn't deserve death for that. That was a period

when great nationalist leaders were not allowed to survive. Bangabandhu, Allende and the likes had to embrace martyrdom and make way for military rulers, who served as yes-men to the mightiest nation. When we think of Bangabandhu's tragic death, we are engulfed with unbearable sorrow.

How do we remember Bangabandhu now? What is he to me? To our 150 million people? He is our best politician ever born. He is the selfless leader who fought his whole life for an independent country for his Bangalee brothers and sisters. He achieved his goal although he had to leave tragically after a few years like quite a few third-world nationalist leaders. His people love and respect him beyond description. He loved them to a fault and they love him in return. They have recently voted his elder daughter to power once again, this time with a huge mandate. As long as the Padma and the Meghna will be there, Bangabandhu will be fondly remembered by his people.

Junaidul Haque is a novelist and critic.