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Murder in prison ... and more murder

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BA NGLADESH'S history, especially the stream of it set into motion after the liberation of the country in December 1971, has been a tortuous and painful one. You need to sit back and reflect on all the good men we have lost, all the values we have seen take flight even as we have prayed that things will get back on track at some point or the other. It is when you come to 1975, when you remember that *annus horribilis*, that you recoil from a recapitulation of what you have known.

If to know is to suffer, then we as a people have known much and have suffered excessively. The assassination of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, with nearly his entire family, was a rude shock that left us reeling in the weeks and months after August 15, 1975. Yes, of course we had come through a series of coups d'etat, all of them in Pakistan. In a free Bangladesh, we looked forward to a political system where the old methods of forcing a government from office would be a tale of the past. It was not just a hope we nurtured. It was a belief we shared once Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign people's republic through a focused war of liberation in 1971.

Bangabandhu's murder put paid to that hope and that belief. The sadness was in the knowledge that a government based on popular sanction had been overthrown. The sadness took on an even more sinister hue when the ouster of the government came through murder and mayhem. In that summer of cumulative pain, we watched as a group of young military officers, in connivance with a band of political predators symbolised by the likes of Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed, pushed the country further down the path to disaster. It was in November of the year that matters came to a head, for reasons that had to do with the murders of August.

We were young, trying to live through life in all the idealism we had seen sprout in our consciousness since the later part of the 1960s. We had gone to war; and those who had been forced into internal exile in the occupied country in their own, diverse, silent ways contributed to an augmenting of the war effort. The Mujibnagar government was the repository of our loyalty. Our ideal was the incarcerated Bangabandhu. As November came round in 1975, it was with a sudden twist to the heart that we realised how poorly off we as a nation were with Bangabandhu dead and all the great men of the Mujibnagar government in prison. Darkness was once again part of collective national life, as it had once been in the year we fought off the Pakistanis.

Bangabhaban and struggle for power

And yet there was that certain whiff of things happening in early November. No one knew the nature of the portents, but over the previous few weeks rumours had begun to circulate about a power struggle

getting underway at Bangabhaban and in the cantonment. Briefly, the story was this: senior officers in the army, among whom were Brigadier Khaled Musharraf, Colonel Shafaat Jamil, Colonel Najmul Huda and Major ATM Haider, all heroes of the 1971 war, were determined that the chain of command broken by the assassin majors and colonels through the coup in August needed to be restored. The assassins of course remained ensconced inside the safe confines of the presidential palace, along with Khondokar Moshtaque.

The chief of army staff, Major General Ziaur Rahman, having taken no steps to exercise authority over the assassin officers, was himself under threat of removal from his position. By the evening of November 2, it was obvious that changes of a major nature had begun to take shape. By the next day, November 3, it became fairly clear that Musharraf had gained the upper hand and was putting pressure on Moshtaque to give up the presidency. What exactly was being done about the majors and colonels was not at that stage very clear. Outside the power circles, in various parts of the city, a certain sense of relief began to be felt in the expectation that Moshtaque and his cohorts were now under assault. No one needed any telling that they had to go, but precisely when that was to happen was not yet clear.

Three soldiers

Meanwhile, Khaled Musharraf's elderly mother and his younger brother Rashed Musharraf took part in a procession, on November 3, that made its way toward Bangabandhu's residence, all the way raising slogans demanding a trial of the killers of the Father of the Nation. It was a patent hint of which way things were going. More importantly, it was what clearly set Colonel Abu Taher, no longer in the army, into organising a resistance in the military against people his supporters had already begun labelling as followers of an 'Indo-Soviet axis.' General Zia, by then already under house arrest, was the figure around whom Taher and his men began shaping the resistance to Khaled Musharraf.

A good deal of mystery pervaded the political scene at the time. Even as his enemies went into planning strategy against him, Brigadier Musharraf was found spending a long stretch of time trying to negotiate a deal at Bangabhaban that would have Moshtaque and his team leave office quietly. Musharraf, one of the most brilliant of tacticians in the 1971 war, was suddenly observed to be oblivious to conditions outside Dhaka, especially in places like Joydevpur and Comilla where forces arrayed against him were spreading the lie that he was a foreign agent and therefore leading the country to a new phase of servitude.

Death of Mujibnagar men

As Musharraf remained busy in the presidential palace and as Taher went around developing his own plans of liquidating the Musharraf group, a maca-



Syed Nazrul Islam



Tajuddin Ahmed



Mansoor Ali



AHM Quamruzzaman

bre plan of murder was given shape to and then executed. Prior to that, a day earlier, a senior Bengali journalist well-known for his pro-Pakistan stance in 1971 and at that point working for a foreign media organisation, disseminated the news that a letter purporting to be from the Indian authorities and suggesting that the detained Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, M. Mansur Ali and AHM Quamruzzaman, all leading figures in the Mujibnagar government then in prison, be freed and so enabled to form a new government for Bangladesh. The implication, as sinister as it was baseless, was that foreign forces, in this case Indian, were in league with the jailed politicians.

On the night between November 3 and 4, all four politicians were gunned down in a cell inside Dhaka central jail by the very men who had in August murdered Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family. Khaled Musharraf and his men clearly had little idea, even as they remained sorting out the mess of a power struggle at Bangabhaban, that the tragedy

had already occurred at Dhaka jail. A mere few hours after the murders had been committed, all the majors and colonels involved in the coup d'etat of August 15, 1975 (and the killings of November 3, 1975), were allowed to fly off to Bangkok with their families. Musharraf had triumphed, but he remained as yet unaware of the price he had paid to ascend to the top. On the morning of November 4, a newly freed from jail Korban Ali, minister for information in Bangabandhu's government, was spotted telling a crowd outside his Wari home of the horrific murders just hours earlier. A short while later, a young man was noted telling individuals at the mausoleum housing the remains of Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Khwaja Nazimuddin that the four leaders killed inside Dhaka central jail had to be buried inside the same compound.

New dispensation

Between November 4 and 6, a flurry of announcements and statements made by

the president were aired over the radio. The queer part of the story was that no one exactly knew who the president was. The popularly held belief was that Moshtaque had been ousted by Brigadier Khaled Musharraf. But if that was true, who had replaced him? No one knew. Meanwhile, fresh rumours began to make their rounds, all reinforcing the thought that for all his triumph in securing the departure of the assassins, that Musharraf was really on shaky ground. Rumbblings of discontent were gaining in intensity inside Dhaka cantonment and elsewhere. Soldiers unhappy with Musharraf were organising themselves, through the active involvement of Colonel Taher, in a plot to overthrow Musharraf, who had meanwhile been appointed chief of staff of the army in succession to the detained Ziaur Rahman.

As the country teetered on uncertainty, November 6 dawned with newspaper images of a beaming Khaled Musharraf being decorated with epaulettes reflecting his new rank of major general by the chief of staff of the navy,

Rear Admiral MH Khan, and the chief of staff of the air force, Air Vice Marshal MG Tawab. The latter had been flown in from Germany, where he had been leading a retired life, to take over from AK Khondokar in the period following August 15.

As the day progressed on November 6, the pieces began to fall into a pattern. The announcement that Khondokar Moshtaque Ahmed had resigned the presidency was swiftly followed by news that the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Abu Sadat Muhammad Sayem, had replaced him. A new order appeared to be in place finally. In the late afternoon, President Sayem's motorcade was observed passing through Bijoynagar. He was cheered by many bystanders. A number of young men went into animated discussions of how the Musharraf triumph would soon lead the country back to normality. The new president addressed the nation late in the evening and specifically condemned the killings of the national leaders in August and November.

Khaled Musharraf dies

As the night deepened, rumours of an unsavoury kind began to make the rounds. General Khaled Musharraf, they appeared to suggest, was waging a desperate struggle to hold on to his authority against the army units now beginning to move against him. In the cantonment, slogans of a 'sepoy-janata' revolution were raised. The entire area began to resonate with them. A full-scale rebellion was on and for once the shrewd, brilliant Khaled Musharraf appeared unable to resist the tide against him and his loyalists.

As November 7 dawned, Dhaka passed into the hands of Colonel Taher and his men, who lost little time in freeing General Ziaur Rahman from confinement and restoring him to authority as chief of staff of the army. For General Musharraf, conditions had already gone from bizarre to eerie. He and his loyalists were on the run from the marauding men who had clearly thrown in their lot with Taher and Zia. Attempting to make their way out of Dhaka in the hope of organising resistance, Musharraf, Huda and Haider found themselves in Sher-e-Banglanagar. Within minutes they became prisoners of the men they had once commanded. All three were brutally murdered. Their corpses were then subjected to varied forms of humiliation.

Sometime in the early afternoon, General Zia made his way to Bangabhaban. Soldiers and a crowd of onlookers raised, for the first time in independent Bangladesh, the slogan of *Nara-e-Takbeer*, punctuated of course by another, *Sepoy-Janata Zindabad*.

As twilight descended on the country on November 7, 1975, all hope, raised briefly only days earlier, of a revival of the spirit that had led Bengalis into the war of liberation in 1971 seemed to have been snuffed out. Musharraf loyalists in the army, those who had survived death, were scattered and making their way to safety. Moshtaque and his cabal were out, sure, but those who took charge after Khaled Musharraf's murder appeared to promise to continue what had been inaugurated on August 15.

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Tajuddin Ahmad as I knew him

He was also very popular among the people of his locality in Kapasia. They used to come to him for assistance. He always listened to them attentively and helped them as much as he could, often going out with them to different places.

ABDUL MATIN

IN 1969, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman paid a visit to Karachi to explain the six-point program of Awami League to the people of West Pakistan and to organise his party. He was accompanied by a large delegation, including Tajuddin Ahmad.

An interesting incident took place during the visit. Pir Pagaro, who was a leader of a religion-based party, invited Bangabandhu and his team to his house for dinner one evening. On the same day Tajuddin Ahmad suddenly became sick. On learning that he would not go to the dinner I asked our cook to prepare *alu bharta*, *pabda macher jhole* and *dal* for him. When I told Tajuddin Ahmad about this menu, his face suddenly lit up, he immediately rushed to his colleagues and asked: "What do you want to eat tonight? If you want mutton *biriyani*, roast chicken and kebab, you can go to Pir Pagaro's house. If you prefer to eat *alu*

bharta, *pabda macher jhole* and *dal*, you better stay here. Now the choice is yours."

Some went and the others stayed back. Years later, Nurjahan Murshed explained that Tajuddin Ahmad was a firm believer in secular politics, and did not like to associate himself with any kind of religion-based politics. So, in order to avoid going to Pir Pagaro's house, he became "politically sick." Obviously he did not want to do anything against the dictates of his conscience.

My acquaintance with Tajuddin Ahmad dates back to my school days. Early in 1953, I stayed with my brother in Room N-12 of Fazlul Huq Hall of Dhaka University for about a month. Tajuddin Ahmad was one of his roommates. Tajuddin Ahmad lived a very simple but disciplined life. His usual dress was *pyjama* and shirt. He used to wash his clothes himself. (I came to know later that he used to wash his clothes before going to bed even when he was the prime minister of the Bangladesh government in

exile.) He used to eat *chira*, *gur* and banana in the morning.

Tajuddin Ahmad was a meritorious student and regularly kept a diary. He was well-read and had deep knowledge about politics. He was a regular speaker at all students' meetings and they used to listen to him with full attention and great interest. He was also very popular among the people of his locality in Kapasia. They used to come to him for assistance. He always listened to them attentively and helped them as much as he could, often going out with them to different places.

After I got admitted to Armanitola Government High School in 1953, my brother and I moved to a house close to my school. My brother was then a student of law at the University of Dhaka. Tajuddin and other close friends of my brother were regular visitors to our house and often shared meals with us. He once complained to my brother: "I am not eating chops or cutlets at your house. I shall eat *dal-bhat*. Why do you serve *dal-bhat* on such flat plates? I would prefer to eat in soup bowls instead." We still have those dinner plates at our ancestral house, and remember his comments whenever we use them.

During the time of Ayub Khan, I once asked Tajuddin: "As a leader of the opposition party, why do you always criticise

all the actions of the government? You should at least appreciate some of the good things which the government does." He replied: "When I am hungry, I want to eat rice. If someone offers me a mixture of rice and paddy, shall I have the time and patience to pick and eat the rice one by one leaving aside the paddy?" He later explained to me how military dictators deceived the public by doing a few "so-called good things" which only distracted the attention of the people from the main issues. According to him, all military dictators always served their own interests.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman being in jail in Pakistan, it was Tajuddin Ahmad, the worthy deputy of Bangabandhu, who took the onus of leading the Bangladesh government in exile. As the prime minister, he earned the confidence of the people of Bangladesh and the trust of Indira Gandhi, then prime minister of India. He united and mobilised the liberation forces fighting against the Pakistani army and formed the armed wing of the government of Bangladesh, called the "Mukti Bahini," under a united command.

He was always calm while taking decisions but firm in his convictions. The credit for the victory in the war of independence in Bangladesh goes to a great

extent to his foresight, able leadership and great organising capability. Unfortunately, his contributions to the independence of Bangladesh are yet to be evaluated properly.

After his return from Pakistani captivity on January 10, 1972, Bangabandhu took over as the prime minister of Bangladesh and made Tajuddin the minister of finance and planning. As a minister, he never liked to be dictated by the civil servants. Once I heard him telling a senior civil servant: "Please do not tell me what I should do. As a civil servant, your duty is to give me the options with their merits and demerits. Let me take the decision on my own."

It was a misfortune for the country that a misunderstanding between Bangabandhu and Tajuddin was created by a group of people. As a result, Tajuddin had to resign from the cabinet on October 26, 1974. It was unfortunate that Bangabandhu took the decision to remove Tajuddin, perhaps without verifying the allegations against him. He was hurt by Bangabandhu's decision but never expressed any displeasure against him. In fact, he continued to support Bangabandhu even after that. The history of Bangladesh would have been different today if Bangabandhu had continued to depend on Tajuddin, once his most

trusted deputy, for his advice during that difficult period.

It was perhaps the darkest chapter in our history when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to whom we owe so much for the independence of Bangladesh, was brutally killed with other members of his family on August 15, 1975. Tajuddin was also killed, together with three other national leaders, Syed Nazrul Islam, M. Mansur Ali and M. Quamruzzaman, inside the Dhaka Central Jail on November 3 of the same year.

Some disgruntled army officers were involved in both the gruesome killings. We are ashamed as a nation that we failed to protect our national leaders who made so many sacrifices for the independence of Bangladesh. The soil of Bangladesh, once soaked with the sacred blood of three million martyrs, thus continued to soak more blood, this time of the leaders who freed this soil from the clutches of Pakistani occupation. It is unfortunate that thirty-four years passed since the killings but the perpetrators are yet to be punished and the real motives of the killings are still unknown.

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