

MUJIBNAGAR

# First Bengali government in history

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE emergence of the provisional Bangladesh government in Mujibnagar, forty years ago on this day in 1971, was a defining moment for the Bengali nation. The first Bengali government in history, administered by Bengalis and for Bengalis, it took shape in the grey region between the sinister and the illuminating. The sinister was the programmed genocide launched with unprecedented viciousness by the Pakistan occupation army; and the illuminating was the truth that such a brutal assault on human dignity, indeed on the traditions of a people, could not go unchallenged and unbeaten.

And so it was on April 17, 1971 that in Meherpur of Chuadanga, the senior leaders of the Awami League, close associates of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, came together to proclaim before the world that out of the debris of a fast enveloping war had emerged a government, the overriding purpose behind the deed being the liberation of the land.

And that said it all. Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, M.Mansoor Ali and A.H.M Quamruzzaman informed their fellow Bengalis and then the world that occupied Bangladesh was ready for a twilight struggle against Pakistan. It did not matter that Bangabandhu Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman had been spirited away in prison somewhere in Pakistan. But it did matter that he was the symbol of the struggle about to be unleashed by a nation brutalised by savagery.

Long hours had been spent working out the details of the announcement of the government, its line-up and its objectives. Men like Amirul Islam, the eminent lawyer, had worked on the draft proclamation that would be read out on the occasion. And Yusuf Ali, teacher turned politician, was there to do the job. He would do it with finesse. Journalists from the global media had been told of the event and on the day would make sure they were there to take in the measure of Bengali resistance to Pakistan.

The moment was a first for Bengalis in their thousand-year history. Of course, Sirajuddoulah, the last independent nawab of Bengal, had perished in 1757, waging war against the British and their local cohorts in defence of a lost cause. But here was Bengal, or the eastern part of a whole truncated already through the grim turn of events in 1947, ready to rise in defence of its self-esteem.

There was a qualitative difference between Sirajuddoulah and the men about to transform themselves into a government in April 1971. It was simple: the political structure which Tajuddin Ahmed and his



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associates hurriedly cobbled into shape would be the first Bengali government in history. Never before had Bengalis governed themselves. Now, caught between a rock and a hard place, the government that would come to be known as Mujibnagar had chosen to strike back.

Much good and many unprecedented events flowed from April 17, 1971. The essence of it all was the

creation of a sense of purpose among the Bengali nation. Students, academics, doctors, lawyers, artistes, politicians, civil servants, journalists, diplomats, soldiers -- all rallied to the cause because the Mujibnagar government was there. Thousands of young men simply marched from their villages and their towns and then trekked through woodlands and swam across streams and rivers

to link up with Mujibnagar. What had till March 25 been the improbable turned out to be the eminently possible. Songs of revolution that Bengalis had never heard before became part of their existence through Shwadhin Bangla Betar. Bengali officers of the Pakistan army, now no more with it and very much a moving force behind the resistance, forged a guerrilla force named the Mukti Bahini and let it loose upon the marauding men from the mountains of the distant west.

What if the Mujibnagar government had not taken shape? What if the men who would lead the armed struggle against Pakistan had chosen to spend the rest of their lives waiting for a negotiated settlement to the crisis? What if, in the absence of resistance, Pakistan had perpetuated its presence in Bangladesh and cast its ever-darkening shadow on Bengali heritage?

These are questions that need not be answered, seeing that history was to take an unambiguous course and was to lead the Bengali nation to its supreme triumph. Yet, prior to April 17, 1971, these fears were all too real for the nation to dismiss out of hand. Bangabandhu had been commandeered by the Pakistan army; and not one of us knew where the rest of the Awami League leadership echelon was at that point.

We would, of course, know subse-

quently that even as we worried about the future, Tajuddin Ahmed and Amirul Islam were making frantic efforts to locate the other men who would form the core of the Mujibnagar government. Over a period of nearly a month, Syed Nazrul Islam, Mansoor Ali, Quamruzzaman, M.A.G. Osmany and a host of others would link up with Tajuddin Ahmed. The moment that would make history would be at hand.

It is that lighting of the candle in the dark we celebrate this morning. The men who built the edifice of Bengali resistance little knew before March 25, 1971 of the huge ordeal that lay ahead of them. They were men whose belief in constitutional politics had been total and unequivocal. And yet these were the men on whose shoulders devolved the responsibility of guiding a bewildered, frightened nation to freedom. They did the job marvellously well. They shaped a revolution that would put in global political orbit the first sovereign Bengali republic in history.

And we are better off today because of the great cause that the Mujibnagar men upheld, with fortitude and foresight, in our year of unmitigated tragedy and untrammelled triumph.

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## SHIFTING IMAGES

# Some things need not change



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FOR most of us living in the United States the word "change" has acquired a brand new

meaning -- it has almost become the defining element of our daily lives. The ubiquitous word appears on TV commercials, billboards and flyers. I even receive mail addressed to no one in particular, but to the "Current Resident," which states unequivocally "Time To Change Your Phone!"

Who cares about whether or not the person at the other end needs a new phone or has specific preferences? The decision is made by an unknown marketing professional, in some remote location, whose goal is to convince the "Current Resident" to change her phone or her car or even her "current" home, and most importantly, to sell her a new one!

I often wonder why the "change" concept has gripped the American psyche so forcefully. The most plausible explanation seems to be that it gives one a sense of being "with-the-time" or a feeling of mobility, modernity and progress -- after all, no one wants to lag behind and appear to be a loser!

Unfortunately, the change trend is not confined to ads and public spaces. It has penetrated into our social lives. Friends and acquaintances often declare: "We are changing our car ... actually upgrading to a hybrid Lexus. You know, the latest technology, fully loaded, great mileage, environmentally friendly etc." Similarly, many retired people we know have "downsized" by moving from their stately mansions to "upgraded" condos. One is subjected to the standard explanation: "Once the children left we felt lonely in the huge house so we moved to an

apartment in the centre of town. Wanted to simplify our life! Of course, the new place is 'state of the art' -- a high tech kitchen with the latest appliances and modern baths with Jacuzzis and toilet seats that automatically heat up in the winter!"

It's difficult to fathom how life could be simplified with all the extra trappings! The point, however, is that whether it's upgrading, downsizing or rightsizing it's change that everyone is seeking. Some do it to counter boredom and for the excitement of acquiring something new, others do it for competitive reasons and fall for the attractive ad campaigns which convince people that anything

*Thus, once in a while it may be helpful to pause, take a breath and ask: Do all things need to change? For example, does a spiritually uplifting piece of art, music or literature need upgrading?*

new is more savvy and technologically superior, and a few genuinely need a "change."

I belong to the old-fashioned minority that is intimidated by anything unknown, which makes me reluctant to venture out of my comfort zone of familiar objects and surroundings. Often, people look at me with gaping wonder when they discover that I don't own an iPhone, a Mac or a centrally wired sound system in my home! To be totally honest, I was once tempted into acquiring an iPhone but, after accidentally pressing the wrong icons a few times, I managed to deactivate most of the functions! Hence, the best option was to revert back to the conventional cell phone, which responds to touch in a more "human" way!!

Please don't get me wrong -- I am not advocating that the

world should remain static. Of course, we must adapt to new ideas and adopt new ways that help us move forward. As Alfred Tennyson said: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new, And God fulfils Himself in many ways, Lest one good custom should corrupt the world." However, Tennyson is referring to "change" at an entirely different plane: an evolution of ideas, attitudes and thinking. It's also what President Obama promoted in his campaign slogan: "Change we can believe in" and the response chant "Yes we can!"

This is the kind of change I readily support since it steers people toward overcoming prej-

udices of Hindu society, through the life of a young woman who is deified by her orthodox and conservative father-in-law. The latter, a zealous worshipper of Kali, convinces everyone that his daughter-in-law is a re-incarnation of the goddess. With time the young, impressionable girl also starts believing that she may indeed possess celestial powers. However, when she fails to save her ailing nephew from death despite her "divine" healing force, she is shattered and loses her mind.

The beautiful imagery that Ray creates through skillful lighting, innovative sets and captivating background music (by Ustad Ali Akbar Khan) is so compelling that it leaves the audience spellbound. He uses powerful, slow-moving shots and artistically framed, expressive facial close-ups of the protagonist Sharmila Tagore, to capture the complex feelings of a fragile and naïve young woman who is manipulated and emotionally destroyed by an irrational, decadent and insular society. Especially remarkable is the subtle and soft touch with which the director handles a socially and emotionally explosive topic.

After the show, I came out and stood for a few moments on the steps of the Kennedy Center to admire its imposing architecture on the banks of the Potomac. My heart filled with a sense of wonderment, not at the physical beauty of the pristine setting, but, at the magic of the movie that I had watched for the last hour and a half. A black and white film made fifty years ago without Dolby Digital sound or High Definition visuals, which will remain etched in my mind as a perfect work of art requiring no "change" or "upgrade!"

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank. She is a resident in Washington DC.



TWO Singaporean soldiers are talking.

Tan: "Pass the tiramisu." Lim: "Cannot-la." Tan: "Why not?" Lim: "Against army regulations to help another soldier to dessert."

Ba-dum! That joke was inspired by the many letters I received about a scandalous photo published recently on Facebook of a Singapore soldier strolling along empty-handed while his poor domestic helper followed behind carrying his enormous military back-pack. The incident created much laughter in Singapore and outside. Good to see that Singaporeans can laugh at themselves.

So with thanks to Irene, Jason, Ms. Gee, Prasad and other readers, here are eight more Lion City army jokes.

2) A Nato soldier, standing guard in the rain with a 20-kilo pack on his back, says: "Life is hard." A People's Liberation Army soldier, standing in the snow in an ill-fitting uniform with a long march ahead, says: "Life is hard." A Singaporean army cadet taking his iPad out of the 15-kilo pack his maid is carrying, says: "No Wi-Fi?! WTF?!"

3) The commander sees the hopeless results of Private Tan's shooting exercises and his face falls. Tan, knowing that he has done badly, says: "Sorry, sir. I feel like going to a quiet corner and shooting myself." The commander says: "Good idea-la. I suggest you take a LOT of bullets."

4) Private Lim fails basic training and reports to the commander for punishment. The officer says: "Chose your own forfeit. One month's loss of privileges or 20 days' pay." The Singapore cadet

thinks about it. "I guess I'll take the money."

5) As a joint exercise of Southeast Asian forces gets underway, a Malaysian general says to a Thai colonel: "I just discovered something that does the work of fifty soldiers." The Thai asks: "Really? What is it?" The Malaysian replies: "Two hundred Singaporean soldiers."

6) The term "secure the building" means different things to different military personnel.

Nato troops: "Occupy the premises and prevent anyone else entering."

US Marines: "Make an all-sides armed assault on the place, and then defend it with suppressive fire."

Singapore soldiers: "Take out a three-year lease with an option to buy."

7) Seven ways the Singapore army is trying to boost recruitment:

- i) Military transport flights now earn frequent flier miles;
- ii) Superiors can now be addressed as "Dude;"
- iii) Army walkie-talkies replaced with latest iPhones;
- iv) There's always plenty of parking at the mall when you're driving a tank;
- v) Radar screen toggles with user's Facebook page;
- vi) New uniform to be issued in Ermenegildo Zegna herringbone with silk Hermes lining;
- vii) Army rations now include freeze-dried Starbucks latte.

8) The three golden rules for Singapore Cadets:

- i) If it doesn't move, hide behind it;
- ii) If it does move, surrender to it;
- iii) If it has four legs and isn't a table, eat it.

9) A Singapore radio station receives a call. "This is the military. Can you tell us the exact time?" The deejay asks: "Who wants to know?" The caller says: "What difference does that make?"

The deejay explains: "If you are spies, it's three o'clock. If you are pilots, it's 15 hundred hours. If you are navy guys, it's six bells. If you are local army cadets, it's 120 minutes to happy hour."

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