

# The murder of Major General Abul Manzur, Bir Uttam

This is the first of the four-part series

LAWRENCE LIFSCHELTZ

"Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are."

Benjamin Franklin

## THE NARRATIVE

On June 2, 1981, General Abul Manzur, the Commandant of the Chittagong Cantonment, was killed under mysterious circumstances while in army custody inside the Cantonment. Manzur had distinguished himself as a Sector Commander during Bangladesh's Liberation War and been the recipient of the highest honor conveyed upon combatants of the war. He was among those honored few, who earned the distinction of Bir Uttam.

Among those who knew him, Manzur was considered a highly capable and intelligent officer. Yet, in the chaotic days after General Ziaur Rahman's death on a visit to Chittagong, Manzur was accused by General Ershad, the Chief of Army Staff, and his closest companions of having organized an attempted coup against Ziaur Rahman which resulted in Ziaur Rahman's assassination at the Circuit House in Chittagong during the early morning hours of May 30th.

From the outset there was widespread skepticism of the narrative the Army High Command began disseminating. For those of us who had painstakingly investigated the coup against President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other political murders, the well-packaged claims advanced by the Chief of Army Staff, General Ershad, and his inner circle had an air of familiar deceit designed to advance a much more complex agenda. Any intelligent observer understood that the first requirement needed in approaching the unsteady "truths" of the "Official Story" was to adhere, in this situation, to the fundamental and guiding principle of skepticism.

The first clue of a "false narrative" was the well-crafted, simple and coherent story that the Army Command presented on the first day regarding what had happened in Chittagong. This was out on the airways twelve hours after Zia's death. This narrative alleged that General Manzur had in an attempt to seize power staged a coup and as a first step organized the killing of General Zia.

Yet, the news from Chittagong itself was very confused. If Manzur had planned a coup in which the intent was to kill Zia and take power, then he did not seem to be able to lay out a very coherent picture of what his own goals were. Those who lived through these events in Chittagong and met Manzur during this period, recall the disarray and confusion that made it quite clear to them that Manzur was himself struggling to understand what had happened and what was going on. He was playing for time to get his bearings. This wasn't the demeanor of a man who had carefully worked through all the details and contingencies of a coup d'état.

In Bangladesh, people are familiar with how a real coup is staged. In August 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was murdered along with most of his family, and those who came to power with bloody hands had their "story" to tell. It held together for quite awhile. Of course, in time the "narrative" fell apart. The "working draft" of how the "six majors" had "done it all" ultimately crumbled as the complexity of the coup involving months of prior planning and wide ranging contacts which included links to elements in the U.S. Embassy slowly emerged from the shadow world.

It was a fascinating tale of an American Ambassador ordering his own Embassy personnel to break all contact with the coup makers months before the coup but realizing after the coup that he had utterly failed to keep his own intelligence personnel "out of it". They had bosses elsewhere. It took a good deal of work to get to the bottom of that story. (See "The Past Is Never Dead: The Long Shadow of the August 1975 Coup" by Lawrence Lifschultz, The Daily Star, 15 August 2005)

Although I was living in Cambridge, England that year, on May 30, 1981, the day Zia was killed in Chittagong, I was in India visiting friends in Bihar. Upon hearing the news I headed for Calcutta and within three days I crossed the border at Benepole on my way to Dhaka.

In the course of a week in Dhaka I gathered a significant amount of information. By the end of that week I had been picked up by the Dhaka police and deported from Bangladesh. In those days certain foreign journalists were not welcome.

I was already on a "black list" for a recent book I had published in London on the Mujib coup and the events surrounding Colonel Abu Taher's execution.

Despite these difficulties I filed the following report in the Far Eastern Economic Review. It appeared on July 10, 1981 with a Dhaka dateline:

"The prevalent version circulating in Dacca of what happened in Chittagong now differs substantially from the first interpretations made when the rebellion was on. Senior Bangladeshi army sources have told leading Bengali journalists that there is grave doubt about whether

Manzur actually initiated and led the Chittagong revolt. According to these army sources, on the morning of May 30, immediately after Zia was killed, Manzur telephoned army headquarters and civilian officials in Dacca, declaring that he was not involved in Zia's killing and that what had happened had been done behind his back. He was quoted as saying that he was not yet in control of events in Chittagong and was attempting to regain command of the situation..."

Although much information remains to be confirmed, army sources claim that Manzur's appeal for negotiations and a peaceful resolution of the crisis to prevent a civil war, was rejected by the first evening, and Dacca Radio, under orders from Ershad, began to broadcast a barrage of denunciations of Manzur as an 'assassin' and 'traitor'. Manzur at that stage is reported to have prepared for confrontation... believing his enemies in the Dacca garrison, particularly Ershad and Major General Mohabat Jan Choudhury of the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), were out to use Zia's death to finish him off at all costs.

Reflecting widespread skepticism, Mohiuddin Ahmed, the deputy leader of the opposition in the Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament),

on June 21, asked government officials to issue

a clear statement describing how Manzur was killed while in custody. Referring to contradictory announcements made by the authorities, in addition to later statements made by police officials to independent newspapers which were at variance with descriptions issued by the government's official spokesman, Ahmed demanded to know how Manzur could have been termed the assassin [of Ziaur Rahman] before a trial could be held." ("Confusion Over A Killing" by Lawrence Lifschultz, Far Eastern Economic Review, July 10, 1981)

## THE CASE

In February 1995, fourteen years after Manzur's death, his brother, Abul Manzur Ahmed accused General H.M. Ershad and his associates of organizing the murder of General Abul Manzur, Commandant of the Chittagong Cantonment, Bir Uttam, a distinguished soldier who fought for the independence of a democratic Bangladesh. By that time, General Ershad, who sat out the Liberation War in Pakistan while others fought and died, had fallen from power after a decade of military dictatorship. It finally seemed safe for Manzur's brother to file the murder case without risking his life in the process.

Now, nearly two decades after Manzur's brother accused General Ershad, the "Manzur Murder Case" has begun to make headlines. One week before Sessions Judge Hosne Ara Akhter was scheduled on February 10th to pronounce judgment in the case, she was abruptly replaced. A new judge, Khandokar Hasan Muhammed Firoz, has been appointed in her place. No one yet knows what this sudden change signifies.

Nevertheless, there is a question that must be asked. Would justice have been truly served had Judge Akhter pronounced a verdict on February 10th? After nineteen years of a meandering and anemic prosecution there are grave doubts that a meaningful verdict would have been rendered by the trial court, if the judge decided to take the last step and pronounce judgment. Indeed, even at the eleventh hour, there were compelling reasons for the Judge to hold back from doing so that justice still might be served.

In November 2013 Judge Akhter openly criticized the Public Prosecutor, Ahaduzzaman Khan Rochi, for his abysmal lack of preparation. Was the serial incompetence of Mr. Rochi and a number of his predecessors, one of design or simply an inherent problem of competence? Another Public Prosecutor, Abul Kashem Khan, told the press on February 2nd that judges have been changed at least twenty-two times since the trial began in August 1995.

Normally, in cases of complex litigation a single



judge is assigned to master the complexity of a case and move it forward with some degree of certitude. This is the gold standard throughout the world. But, clearly nothing even remotely approaching this standard has been the practice in the Manzur Murder Case. The case became a wandering orphan kicked from one judge to another and one prosecutor to another. Yet, the Manzur case matters. It has an important significance for Bangladesh's history.

With the appointment of Judge Firoz it remains unclear whether the Manzur family will ever find justice in the courts of Bangladesh. Remarkably, Colonel Taher's family did after 35 years. Unlike Ershad, but like Zia, Manzur and Taher, were both recipients of the Bir Uttam medal-of-honor. Similarly, they were both Sector Commanders, who along with Colonel Muhammed Ziauddin, escaped from Pakistan to fight in the Liberation War alongside General Zia. Remarkably, Ershad, the repatriate officer who sat out the war in Pakistan, would be implicated in each of their deaths.

General Ershad's lawyers claim that not a single witness has linked him or any of his close associates to General Manzur's murder and therefore he should be exonerated from charges that claim he played a key role in the killing of General Manzur, or as some have termed it, the premeditated and planned "assassination" of Manzur.

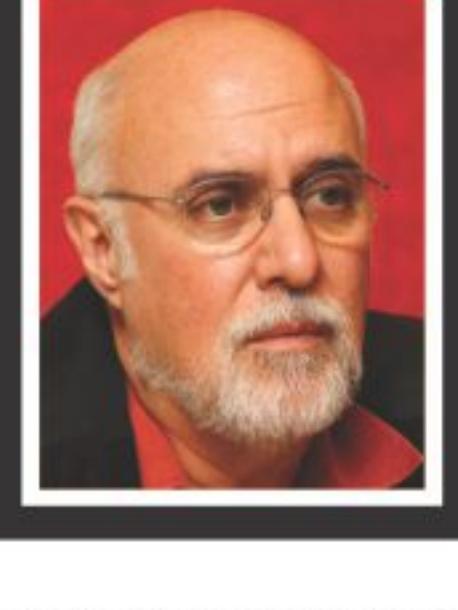
Perhaps, General Ershad was the beneficiary of that old police tactic of rounding up "the usual suspects" while ignoring the real ones. However, one cannot even make that claim because in 33 years not a single suspect has been arrested for Manzur's murder.

Ziauddin Choudhury, the former Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong in his important and thoughtful book on the 1981 events has termed Manzur's death on June 1, 1981, "the second assassination" that took place in Chittagong. The "first" assassination was that of Ziaur Rahman on May 30th. Mr. Choudhury belongs to a rare breed. He is someone who asks serious questions and looks hard for the answers.

It is Choudhury's view that both men, Zia and Manzur, were assassinated. He is one of the very few individuals who has taken the time and made the effort to systematically investigate what happened in Chittagong during those fateful days in 1981. As Deputy Commissioner in Chittagong and someone who knew both Ziaur Rahman and Abul Manzur, his vantage point was unique.

Despite his book having been published in 2009, Ziauddin Choudhury confirmed in a recent interview with this writer that no one from the Public Prosecutor's office, nor investigators working with the Prosecutor, have ever contacted him to discuss important evidence that is presented in his book, "The Assassination of Ziaur Rahman & Its Aftermath".

(TO BE CONTINUED TOMORROW)



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# Challenges before the EC & AL in next phases of UZ polls

SHAKHAWAT LITON

THE preparation of the voter list with photographs before the 2008 parliamentary election had paved the way for bringing an end to the long pervasive culture of fake voting in the elections. The strong leadership of the then Election Commission (EC), led by A.T.M. Shamsul Huda, in guiding and supervising the election administration had also largely contributed to burying the culture of using illegal means in the polls.

Incidents of fake voting were rare in the polls to the Jatiya Sangsad on December 29, 2008. This development continued in a series of elections to different local government bodies—city corporations, municipalities and union parishads—during the Huda-led EC. The current EC, led by Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad, benefited from this in the five city corporation elections held in the middle of last year, though it was unable to demonstrate strong leadership.

Unfortunately, the controversial January 5 parliamentary election reversed the advancement in the electoral system. The voter-less election held amid a boycott by the BNP-led alliance appeared as a major challenge for the ruling Awami League to make it credible by ensuring an impressive voter turnout. But voters were not interested in the one-sided election. Moreover, polls were not held in more than half of the 300 parliamentary seats because candidates in those seats were elected uncontested. But even in an uncontested election, ruling party supporters cast fake votes in many polling stations. There were incidents of stuffing of ballot papers. All the wrongdoings went unchallenged and unpunished, though casting fake votes is a criminal and punishable offence and means denial of one's constitutional right to vote. Thanks to the current EC's poor leadership, the malpractice of casting fake votes returned after a gap of only five years.

Concerted efforts are required to bring an end to this bad culture, which automatically grows stronger if it is not stopped. This was proved in the first phase of the elections to upazila parishads held on February 19. AL men became unruly in more than a dozen upazilas and cast fake votes, snatched ballot papers and ousted their rivals' agents from the polling stations to influence the elections in their favour. The EC's inability to take action against these electoral offences was exposed. CEC Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad, however, claimed that the EC was successful in holding the first phase of the elections in a free, fair and peaceful manner. He acknowledged that some untoward incidents took place in the polls, but did not say whether the EC would take action against those who caused trouble in some upazilas. He ignored the truth. The untoward incidents in more than a dozen upazilas out of 97 cannot be sporadic!

If any wrongdoing goes unpunished, troublemakers always feel encouraged to go ahead with dishonest activities. In the first phase elections to 97 upazila parishads, the AL men could not fare better than their rivals backed by BNP. The better performance in the first phase battle of ballots has boosted the morale of BNP grassroots level leaders and supporters. The situation is the opposite in the AL camp. It is assumed that the AL men will desperately try to fare better than their rivals supported by the BNP in the next battle of ballots in 117 upazilas on February 27. Now, Kazi Rakibuddin and his team will have to reassess their strategy to keep the second phase polls free from any unruly behaviour by AL men. If they fail to do so, the third, fourth and fifth phase elections may see more unpleasant incidents like casting of fake votes. Rakibuddin and his team must decide without delay whether they will contribute towards damaging the electoral system or take measures to regain the image built up five years ago.

AL and the government must also do something to prevent their unruly activists from influencing the elections through illegal and criminal means. If things remain unaddressed, it will taint the image of the government and the AL. Yet AL and the government could have claimed the credit for holding a free, fair and peaceful election had not the ruling party men done unruly things in some upazilas on February 19. There is still time for the government and AL to take steps to prevent the situation from deteriorating further in the next phases of upazila parishads polls. The party may issue directives to its grassroots level leaders urging them not to engage in any dishonest means in the polls. It may warn them of taking stern actions if anyone is found involved in casting fake votes or snatching ballot papers or ousting oppositions' polling agents. The government may urge law enforcers to take action against troublemakers irrespective of their party affiliation.

If the government, AL and the EC take actions to avert unpleasant incidents in the next phases of the polls, it will brighten their image. Otherwise, the situation may deteriorate further and infuse fresh blood to the culture of fake voting in the polls, thereby denying people's constitutional rights to vote. And the trio will be held responsible for damaging the electoral system.

The damage already done to the electoral system has been a major threat to the country's democracy centering on the elections. People enjoy their democratic rights only in elections due to undemocratic attitude of the successive governments and the major political parties. So the election is taken as a festival of democracy. If the purity of this festival is tainted again, people's democracy will not find any space in the country.

The writer is Senior Reporter, The Daily Star.

## CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

### ACROSS

1 Silver-tongued

5 Faux pas

9 Airport aid

11 "The Taming of the Shrew" city

13 Make amends

14 Clickable pictures

15 Sewing aid

16 Inventor's protection

18 Snakes

20 Hot brew

21 Past plump

22 Mayberry sheriff

23 Rent out

24 Verb for you

25 Diploma holder

27 More enormous

29 Brink

30 Eastern temples

32 Mean

34 Tango quorum

35 City leader

36 "My name is -- Lew"

38 Skier's place

39 Sleep disturber

40 Takes to court

41 Swift jets

### DOWN

1 Potential raisin

2 Barrio resident

3 Understanding utterance

4 Outlaw

5 Rotisseri parts

6 Valentine trim

7 Annoyed utterance

8 Did a fourth down job

10 Meal

12 Test for purity

17 Clumsy fellow

19 Bassoon part

22 Oscar-winning film

24 Like the stables

cleaned by Hercules

25 Mass units

26 Foes

27 Witch

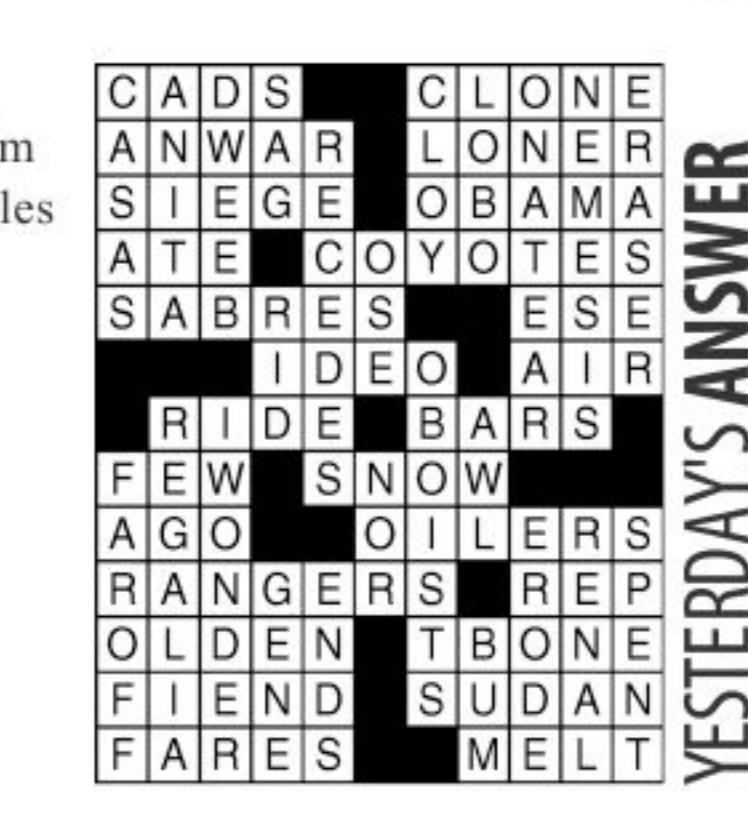
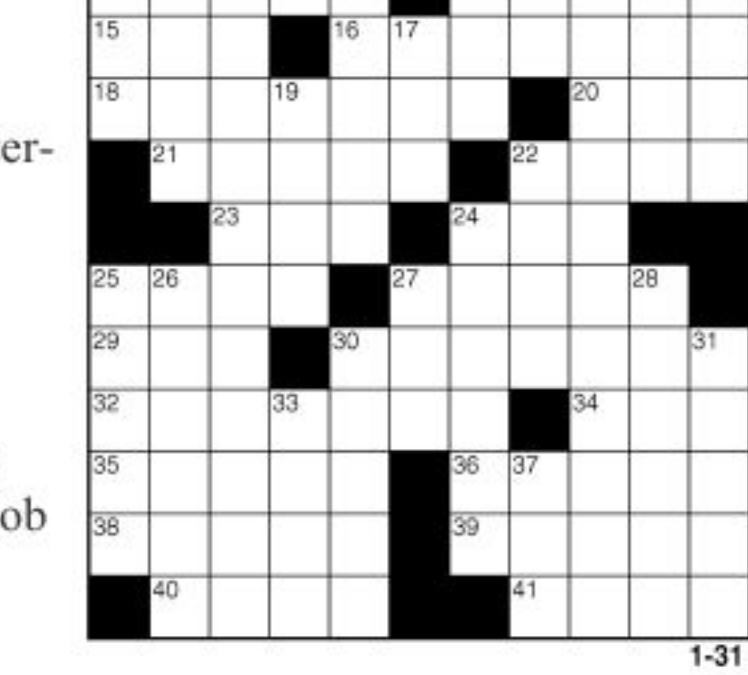
28 Most chilly

30 Reduces

31 Tender areas

33 Tug-of-war need

37 Sinking signal



### CRYPTOQUOTE

G'N YRBBGQJ WIDW WIQ PSGAQBX