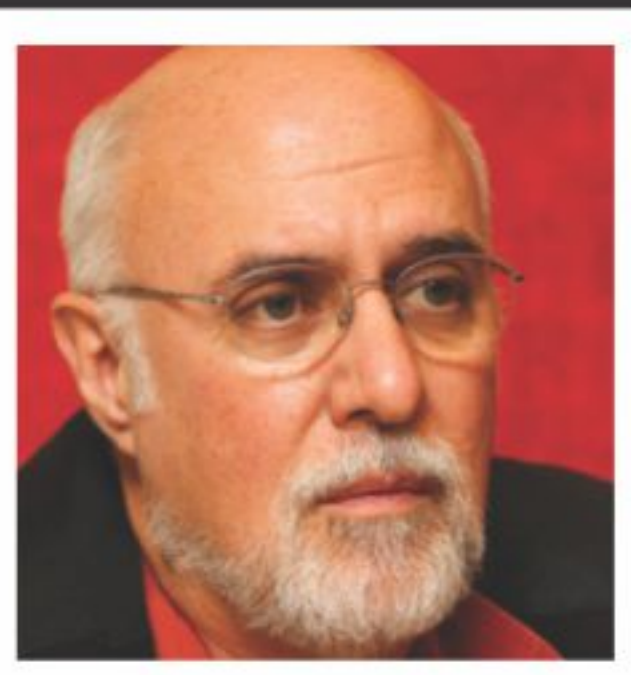


The murder of Major General Abul Manzur, Bir Uttam

Concluding part of the four-part series



IN the years that followed General Ershad and his associates would articulate several variations on the theme of “angry troops”, “agitated soldiers”, “angry men” or “enraged people” being responsible for Manzur’s death.

In early February 2014 the news service, BDnew24 quoted Ershad as saying during a court appearance: “Angry men were trying to snatch Manzur when he was brought to the Chittagong Cantonment. The scuffle led security guards to open fire. Abul Manzur was shot and injured at one point and died while he was being taken to the hospital.”

A colleague of Ershad’s, Lt. Col. Mostafa Kamal told a court in 2013: “Some enraged people tried to snatch Manzoor on the way that triggered shooting between them and the guards. At one stage Manzur was hit by bullets and died on his way to hospital.”

During a 2012 court hearing, Ershad claimed that the news report in *The Daily Azadi* on June 4, 1981 was true. He referred to the paper’s headline that day: “Enraged Armed People Shoot Abul Manzoor Dead and Two Cohorts During Mutiny”.

The principal difficulty with these claims that Ershad and his associates have repeated for 30 years is that they do not accord with the facts. Not a single eyewitness or observer who was present in Chittagong during this period has testified or reported that they saw any “angry men” or “enraged armed people” who first tried to “snatch” Manzur which then led to him being “shot” in a “scuffle”. Some of the stories have Manzur’s “security guards” firing and some have Manzur dying “on the way to the hospital”.

But, no hospital ever saw Manzur that day either dead or alive, or in a wounded state. The only doctor who saw Manzur was an army doctor. Unfortunately, this was after Manzur had been murdered. The doctor was asked by the Commander of the East Bengal Regimental Center, Brigadier Aziz, then in temporary charge of the Cantonment, to “bandage Manzur’s wounds” in order to prepare him for burial.

Ziauddin Choudhury in his book has meticulously reconstructed Manzur’s movements and his non-violent surrender to the police in Fatikchari. Not a word of Choudhury’s account, or in testimony given by eyewitnesses who were in Chittagong, support the fictional narrative of General Ershad and his associates. Choudhury, as Deputy Commissioner in Chittagong was either present or actively involved in monitoring Manzur’s movements after his surrender on June 1st, right up to Manzur’s having been handed over to a military unit at the Hathazari Thana. Choudhury also later confirmed with the Brigadier in charge of the Cantonment that General Manzur arrived safely at the Cantonment.

Ziauddin Choudhury’s account should be compared to Ershad’s: “The following day Manzur’s death was reported in the newspapers through a government press release from Dhaka as an act of attrition by angry soldiers while the later was being transported to the cantonment from Hathazari police station. The report was a down right fiction.” “Manzur was not killed on his way to the cantonment. He was killed inside the cantonment on the morning of June 2, 1981 as Brigadier Aziz told the Deputy Inspector General [of Police]. However, Brigadier Aziz did not say that Manzur died at the hands of angry soldiers...”

“When the doctor was asked to “bandage the wounds” he found Manzur dead from a single bullet which had pierced his head clean through—not from a volley of bullets. . . . Manzur was killed by an army officer sent from Dhaka, and not by ‘angry soldiers’. Why Manzur should be murdered and not brought before a trial? Did he know something that the Army did not want revealed?”

The problem with lies and cover stories is that the actors in this type of drama sometimes forget the lines of their own script. Every version of the “angry soldiers” story that Ershad or his associates have publicly spoken about, as a way of deflecting suspicion of their own involvement, involves Manzur being killed on the way to the Chittagong Cantonment after the police had turned General Manzur over to a special army unit.

Yet, the Inspector General of Police of Bangladesh, A.B.M.G. Kibria, who was the IGP at the time of these events, stated in his testimony given to the CID that Ershad had himself answered a direct question that the IGP had put to him saying that Manzur had been killed “as soon as

Manzur was brought to the Cantonment”.

Kibria, who the day before had forcefully opposed Manzur being turned over to the Army, wanted to know from Ershad how Manzur had been killed.

According to Kibria’s testimony, “In the afternoon [of June 2nd] there was a meeting at Bangabhaban which was presided over by the Acting President. In the meeting I asked the CAS [Chief of Army Staff] how Manzur was killed when at his [Ershad’s] prodding and insistence the Acting President [had] ordered the handover [of] Manzur [and] other alleged military offenders in military custody, and in effect [they had been placed] in his custody. The [CAS Ershad] replied [that] as soon as Manzur was brought to the Cantonment he was killed by irate soldiers by a burst of fire.” Clearly, like Air Vice Marshal Sadruddin, the IGP did not believe Ershad’s story about “irate soldiers”.

According to Kibria’s testimony, Manzur was killed by Ershad’s own admission in, and not enroute to the Cantonment. This is a significant point. Having heard Ershad’s admission, Kibria describes how he took immediate steps to send a senior police officer to Chittagong, and then traveled there himself. Kibria informed his police colleagues in Chittagong about the meeting at Bangabhaban and his concerns about the safety of other military personnel in police custody, if the army was able to take hold of them.

Kibria describes to his colleagues how after Manzur’s death he was able to finally convince Sattar that steps had to be taken to protect other “arrested military personnel in civil custody. . . . against [the] strong demands of the then Army Chief, General Hossain Mohammed Ershad” that these men also be turned over to the army. Clearly, Kibria feared that others would be killed by Ershad’s associates, if they were turned over.

Indeed, in the weeks and months ahead many detained military personnel would be tortured in army custody. They were then tried before a Field Court Martial held inside the Chittagong central jail. Thirteen were executed. According to General Moin Choudhury, the Adjutant General at the time, they were denied their fundamental right to a fair trial and their right to mount an adequate legal defense. As previously noted this case has been documented, by the writer Julfikar Ali Manik in his highly regarded book on the case.

The ghastly truth is that these men in all probability were executed for a coup that was not a coup, and a rebellion that never happened. Ziaur Rahman was assassinated. But, Zia was not assassinated by General Abul Manzur, nor by the thirteen officers who went to the gallows.

They were falsely accused, cynically and brutally sacrificed, so that General Ershad and his compatriots could consolidate the power of their faction within the Army. Ershad needed “guilty parties”, essentially scapegoats.

General Moin and Julfikar Ali Manik both note in their books that Ershad produced “confessions” by torture but the so-called trial of the “assassins” proceeded intentionally without a genuine investigation. The DGFI, under the command of Major General Mohabbat Jan Choudhury directed the inquisition.

Was Khaleda Zia right that Ershad was behind her husband’s death? If so, the real coup was in Dhaka, not Chittagong.

As we went to press, the staff of *Prothom Alo* came into possession of copies of testimonies by military and police personnel who were in Chittagong during the fateful days of May and June 1981. These documents pose new questions. I will be addressing these issues in an Epilogue to this four-part series.

THE MURDER CASE

Will this evidence be ignored? Will Judge Firoz pronounce judgment without calling a new witness and making an attempt to secure the absolute safety of my source? Will this individual’s claim to have been present in the Cantonment, and to have seen a high-ranking military officer enter the detention cell where Mazur was being held and allegedly killed be ignored?

Will Judge Firoz or possibly a higher court create the conditions whereby this witness can securely give his testimony? Will the immense significance of the testimony of Air Vice Marshal Sadruddin, IGP Kibria and others that have been buried for decades be ignored or heard? Will Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina



General Ershad, What Is That Plan You Are Talking About? May I Know It?
THE TESTIMONY OF AIR VICE MARSHAL SADRUDDIN

Excerpt from Statement Provided on March 25, 1995 to Inquiry Convened By CID Under The Jurisdiction of The Manzur Murder Case.

. . . they told me that a plan was afoot to trap Maj. Gen Manzur in this incident [the killing of Ziaur Rahman]

May 31, 1981
I am Air Vice Marshal Sadruddin (Rtd.), former Chief of the Air Force . . . I was informed around 7 AM that General Ershad wanted to speak with me on the phone. When I received the phone call, General Ershad gave me the news of President Ziaur Rahman’s assassination the previous night at the Chittagong Circuit House, and he requested that I return to Dhaka quickly. I left [Jessore] for Dhaka a little later by helicopter and arrived there around 10 AM.

I went directly to the Army Chief’s [Ershad] office. I saw several senior army officers in his office . . . General Ershad gave me a quick briefing on the incident. I was there for about twenty minutes. Maj. Gen. Sawkat [Mir Shawkat Ali] and Maj. Gen Moin [Moinul Hossain Choudhury] followed me as I came out of that office. In the corridor they told me that a plan was afoot to trap Maj. Gen Manzur in this incident [the killing of Ziaur Rahman].

“Sir, please make sure that nothing happens to Manzur . . .
June 1, 1981:

I was in the office of the Acting President (Justice Sattar) on June 1, 1981 around 5 PM. Lt. General Ershad was also present there . . . A telephone call came and the Acting President spoke. The Acting President informed us after the call that the Inspector General of Police informed him that Maj. Gen. Manzur, and others had been captured by the police.

On hearing the news General Ershad became agitated and immediately got up from his chair. Without further words he moved to the Red Telephone by the President’s side and dialed a number. What I heard him say over the phone was: “Manzur has been captured by the police. He should be immediately taken over and carry out that plan.” He put down the phone.

I said, “General Ershad, what is that plan you are talking about? May I know it?” He [Ershad] got further agitated by this and said, “Air Chief, you do not understand anything.” I said, “What I understand, I don’t have to know from you.”

I later addressed the President and said, “Sir, please make sure that nothing happens to Manzur and that he is given a trial. If anything happens to Manzur, you will be answerable to the nation.” In reply, Mr. Sattar said, there will be a trial . . .

“You all have killed Manzur.”

June 2, 1981
On June 2, 1981 around 1:30/2:00 AM, Wing Commander Kamal, Director of Air Force Intelligence gave me the news that General Manzur had been killed. I called General Ershad around 6:00/7:00 AM over the phone and said: “You all have killed Manzur.”

pursue negotiations with her newly designated “special envoy” General Ershad, one of the prime suspects in this murder case, in order to make a politically expedient deal, or will wisdom prevail and a recognition take hold which acknowledges that the executive branch should never interfere with the judiciary? Will Sheikh Hasina in light of this new information in the Manzur case, vacate the toxic terrain of politically negotiating with a murder suspect?

Ershad is not only a prime murder suspect. As Chief of Army Staff, he had command responsibility for torture being used to extract confessions under torture of scores of Bangladesh Army officers. These confessions then became the basis of their “convictions” and subsequent executions. These acts represent violations of the Bangladesh Constitution itself, and of international treaties against torture, and other forms of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Furthermore, several Field Court Martials during Ershad’s tenure as Army Chief violated the defendants’ rights under Bangladesh’s military code of justice. These are actionable offenses.

I have known the Prime Minister for a very long time. I cannot believe she has abandoned all sense of decency. She is the daughter of a murdered man. She spent decades pursuing a painful road so that she could secure justice for the deaths of

so many of her family members. Is she more privileged than the children of General Manzur who seek justice for the murder of their father by men aligned to the same political forces that killed Sheikh Mujib?

The Manzur family only seeks exactly the same accountability that the Prime Minister sought for the deaths of her own father, mother and siblings. In light of new information, one can only hope Sheikh Hasina will step back from her “special envoy”, and stand beside General Manzur’s children, saying, “I am with you, not against you, in your pursuit of justice.”

The first time I met Sheikh Hasina was in New Delhi in the early 1980s. She was living in a modest Raj style bungalow with evident but discreet security. I met a frail, yet dignified young woman, who clearly was still suffering deeply from the murder of her family. Who would not be? The trauma and grief were still palpable. Sadness filled the room. She could barely talk without tears coming to her eyes. It was heartbreaking. Sheikh Hasina thanked me for the book I had written trying to unravel the August 1975 coup.

Although several years had passed since those days of August, I was meeting her for the first time and I wanted to express my condolences for her great loss. She heard me out. She was very quiet after I spoke. Again she could barely speak expressing thanks and appreciation in a broken voice.

We then tried to make small talk over tea and avoid painful memories.

As a young reporter in Dhaka in 1973-74, my writing had often been critical during years of famine and upheaval. Yet, a coup d’etat where in every direction the innocent died and a group of military men reenacted the practices of the Pakistan Army, could never be a way forward. During the difficult years that followed Sheikh Hasina rebuilt her life and fought with great determination until she accomplished a semblance of justice for what had been done in August 1975.

Several weeks ago I thought of my first meeting with Hasina in New Delhi as I spoke to Rubana Manzur, the elder daughter of General Manzur. Once again I heard a daughter’s voice break as she tried to talk about her father’s death and the enormous suffering her family has experienced over three decades.

I’m not at liberty to write about these conversations. I can only say that there are very few people who can better understand the depth of that suffering than Sheikh Hasina.

Sheikh Hasina can visit her parents’ graves. Like any child whose parents have died, to be able to visit their final resting place, is a source of great solace. This is especially so if they have died violently. General Manzur’s widow and children have no idea, where their father and husband, is buried. They have no grave to visit to offer their prayers.

No one should use a murder case and a family’s hope for justice as a political bargaining chip. It is unconscionable. I appeal to the Prime Minister to stand back from any of her political advisers who think otherwise.

INNOCENT UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY

I believe General Ershad and his associates who have been accused of General Manzur’s murder are innocent until proven guilty. They should face a fair yet rigorous trial based on professionally gathered evidence and a competent prosecution.

Their right to defend themselves should be regarded as sacrosanct in a democratic country. Of course, this right to a fair trial, was never allowed by Ershad for the young men who were first tortured and then executed under his authority following the so-called Chittagong rebellion. But, in the name of justice Ershad must be guaranteed the precious right of defense that he so cruelly denied to others.

There are other men who may have been involved in Manzur’s murder who, as of yet, have not been charged in this case. It is my understanding that the man named by my source is not on the charge sheet. This is the man who allegedly shot Manzur. This is the individual, a high-ranking army officer, who reportedly traveled from Dhaka to murder Manzur. He may not be the only one who was involved in the operation to kill General Manzur. If the allegations are true, then the man who pulled the trigger and ended Manzur’s life with a single bullet, almost certainly did not act alone in the planning and execution of this crime.

Furthermore, my source, the eyewitness, is not the only eyewitness to these events. A number of people saw the senior army officer enter the room where Manzur was held and where he was killed. His entry was authorized. It is fear that has kept the silence for thirty years. Have conditions emerged, or can they be created, where that fear can be overcome and the decades of impunity ended for those who planned and executed this murder?

The time has come for a major change. The manner in which this case has been handled in the lower courts over twenty years adds up to a mockery of justice and gross misconduct on the part of those who have been responsible for the administration of this trial. In two decades 22 judges have presided over the Manzur case and then been transferred to other duties. The case as a political football has been kept in play.

In the Bangladesh press the Manzur case is openly described as a political bargaining chip where it is argued that it is being used as a mechanism to secure General Ershad’s political cooperation. In the alternative, Ershad is described as offering his full cooperation, if only the needful can be done and arrangements made for this troubling murder case to permanently “disappear”. The ghost of Manzur is keeping General Ershad awake. The “case” will not die.

The politics of Bangladesh has seen many low points in its history where ethical considerations have suc-

cumbed to an emerging market in commodity pricing. Here the commodity is justice and it is being traded on one of those special exchanges that operate behind closed doors. There is only one institution in Bangladesh that has the potential and the capability of shutting down this traders market. It is the Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

The Supreme Court has the authority to remove a case from the jurisdiction of the lower courts if it deems a case to be in the “public interest”. The Manzur case is a case of historic significance. Within it lies the story of how a decade long military dictatorship was established in this country. Mazur’s murder is at the heart of that story.

If this case does not meet the criteria of “public interest” I don’t know what greater criteria would be needed to qualify. Yet, another criteria exists that is more important.

There are four children who left Bangladesh because of the never-ending whispers that their father was an “assassin” and a “traitor”. These whispers wounded them on a daily basis. It followed them to school. It followed them to every house they visited. It followed them to the closed doors of many old friends who shut them out.

How Bangladesh became infected with a “virus of lies” is a phenomenon that requires great reflection. But, the victims of those lies were the children of an innocent man. Those children should be allowed to give their father a proper burial, and then to return to the country they now call home to live their lives in peace.

Manzur’s real “crime” was that he opposed those who were hungry for power and military rule. In fact, he was one of the few democratic “constitutionalists” in the senior ranks of the Bangladesh Army who, like General Moin Choudhury, believed that a Bangladeshi variant of Pakistan’s military dictator, General Ayub Khan, should never set foot in Bangabhaban, whether or not his name was Zia or Ershad. Moreover, they opposed any political party emerging whose paternity could be traced to the cantonment. Was that not the curse of the Pakistan Army? Is it still not the curse of Pakistan? These two men, who fought for democracy and independence, stood for a professional army in a democratic country.

Finally, there is Manzur’s widow who followed her children to America and never wants to return to Bangladesh because she feels there is no possibility of justice ever taking place. As she sees it, the men who killed her husband have gotten away with murder. To date the evidence supports this view.

Perhaps, another road may be possible. It is the road that will take this case to the Supreme Court. Manzur’s brother or Manzur’s children should be accorded standing before the Supreme Court if any one of them asks for the Court to remove the case from the impenetrable caverns of the lower courts where the promise of justice has been hopelessly buried for twenty years.

In the Taher case, Justice Shamsuddin Choudhury and Justice Zakir Hossain, demonstrated how judges themselves can take a case in hand many years after the event. They are able to take the initiative and effectively investigate complex issues by identifying witnesses and ordering them to appear before the Court.

The Supreme Court of Bangladesh has extraordinary powers that it may exercise, if it decides that the use of those powers are required to accomplish justice. The Taher and Manzur cases are different from one another.

One involved a completed trial that was deemed illegal and unconstitutional. Furthermore, Taher’s death sentence had been decided prior to the opening of the trial. The Court declared the crime was the trial itself. It was an illegal proceeding. Thus, Taher’s execution was murder.

The Manzur case involves a live trial in which a verdict has not been pronounced despite nearly twenty years of court proceedings. A vigorous inquiry initiated in the early and mid-1990s by Aminul Haq, one of Bangladesh’s most distinguished Attorney Generals, went off the rails following Haq’s untimely death.

Testimonies like that of Air Vice Marshal Sadruddin’s which have only now surfaced were the result of Haq’s careful guardianship at the time. The Supreme Court has the power to gather the strands of this historic case into its own hands and to ascertain who murdered General Abul Manzur.

The Manzur case challenges the conscience of Bangladesh. How that challenge will be met remains to be seen.