

His towering image, an eternal beacon

Our profound homage to his memory

FORTY years ago today was the darkest day in our national history. For, on that day Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman without whom Bangladesh, the nation-state we call our home, would not have been born, was assassinated along most members of his family. We mourn his loss more and more with each passing year as his towering image dwains on our consciousness with ever greater relevance.

An orchestrated conspiracy of reactionary forces bent upon turning the political clock back and reversing the liberation war values to suit their vicious ambitions led to dire consequences the nation has reeled in for a number of years. Bangabandhu's assassination in an extended sense was followed by the assassination of four leaders. A major ramification was that politics of assassination and coups and counter coups became the order of the day destabilizing polity, distorting constitution, polarising society and creating unnecessary tension therein.

We have had bouts of military, semi-military and autocratic governments up until restoration of democracy in 1991. The return of AL in power after 21 years led to the annulment of indemnity ordinance holding back the trial of Bangabandhu's self-confessed assassins. With the trial and exemplary punishment of most of them, a demand for justice has been met. Now the fugitive convicts have to be brought back home to complete the process of justice.

Bangabandhu's legacy is national asset and property and as such he must be kept above any sort of controversy.

Fixing speed limit at 80 km

Get set before you go

THE government's decision to fix the speed limit of vehicles on highways across the country at 80 kilometres per hour in an attempt to reduce frequent road accidents may have been well-intentioned, but it has left officials at a loss about how to implement it. It appears that the decision was taken without first resolving the technical difficulties the implementation and monitoring of such a "speed governor seal" on all vehicles entails. A similar initiative was taken once before in 2008 when the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) moved to install the speed measurement device, only to recognise subsequently that the device was applicable for diesel-run vehicles only. With gas-, octane- and petrol-run vehicles accounting for four times the number of diesel-run vehicles in the country, the initiative soon fizzled out, as per a Daily Star report. Meanwhile, there was no monitoring of the handful of diesel-run vehicles that were installed with the device.

Unfortunately, it seems that the government did not learn from its past mistakes. There is, as yet, no implementation or monitoring plan in place to ensure that the move will produce any concrete results. Even if we were to assume that a new device that can run on all types of vehicles would be designed and installed, who, we ask, would monitor them, given the harsh reality that there's little will or manpower to even monitor the vast number of faulty vehicles on the road or those operating without proper documentation?

The government ought to set up a comprehensive and realistic plan for reducing highway accidents, beginning with strengthening highway police enforcement and installing speed cameras to check speeding on highways.

COMMENTS

"HRW calls for ensuring free speech" (August 13, 2015)

Faysal Ahamed

We support free speech but it should be constructive.

"Why schoolbag back-breaking?" (August 12, 2015)

Mohammad Anisuzzaman

Right move by the High Court. Let us hope that the parents and others will abide by this decision.

Fazlul Haque

Who will monitor the weight of schoolbags?

Farhana Akhter

I'm really waiting to see the outcome. My kids and so many others are suffering so much.

Rahita

Kids in this age are burdened by so many things.

Ratri

Children struggling with the weight of heavy schoolbags are a common sight in Bangladesh nowadays. They can't even walk properly for the weight.

Zamilur Rashid

Kids in Bangladesh have no longer any childhood.

ABDUL MANNAN

THIS year the nation will be observing the 40th death anniversary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. On this day forty years ago a group of assassins brutally murdered the Father of the Nation along with his entire family.

Mujib was a statesman, a hero and martyr who will be remembered in history for his achievements, farsightedness and humility, all blended in one, a rare example in contemporary history, more so in a politician. He could rise above self and see the future. As a human being he had too much belief and confidence on the people for whom he struggled his entire life, not realizing that all good people had enemies. His brutal killing was not a loss to a family only but a greater loss to a nation he struggled to create, liberate and rebuild.

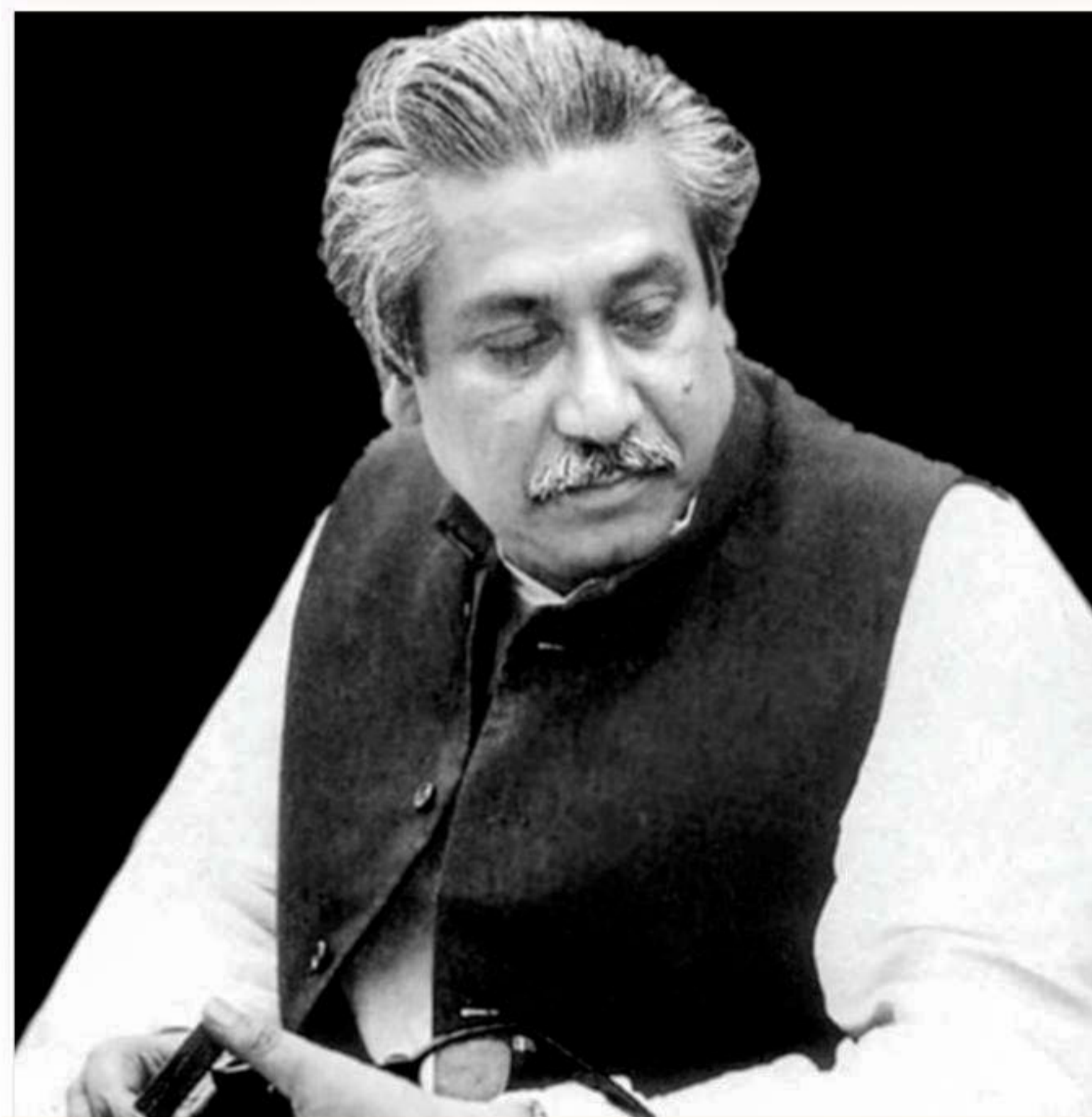
The death of Bangabandhu on that dark night of August 15th 1975 put the country on back gear and for next two decades it had to reel under military or pseudo military dictatorship. Bangabandhu could have been killed on the night of March 25-26, 1971 when the Pakistani Army launched the operation to annihilate the Bengalis. It was sheer luck that he survived the night of mayhem only to be killed by the very people for whom he had dedicated his entire life. As a matter of fact, his death warrant was signed on March 26th 1971 when he declared the independence of Bangladesh before his arrest by the Pakistani army.

During the nine month long war of independence, a section of Awami League leaders led by the Khondakar Mushtaque, the Foreign Minister of the Government in exile, planned to backstab the independence movement. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's Foreign Secretary in his memoir 'White House Years' writes, 'on July 30, a Mr. Qaiyum (Jahurul Qaiyum from Comilla) an elected member of the Awami League closely associated with Bangladesh government in exile, approached our Consulate in Calcutta to say he had been designated to establish contact with the United States. He would return in two weeks for an answer. The Consulate reported this approach to State channels'. Qaiyum was acting on behalf of Khondakar Mushtaque knowing very well that the Nixon administration never supported our liberation war. Mushtaque was trying to send the message via US to Yahya Khan that if Mujib was released he would do his part to stop the liberation war. Kissinger writes, 'on September 4, Farland (US Ambassador in India) suggested to Yahya that we contact the Bangladeshi "foreign minister," ostensibly to check out Qaiyum's bona fides; we would tell him of Yahya's willingness to engage in secret talks....Such was Yahya's quandary that he agreed.'

However Mushtaque and his cohorts' plans fell through due to the cautious

handling of the situation by Tajuddin Ahmed, the Prime Minister of the government in exile.

Once the liberation war was over, the conspiracy against Bangladesh, that had its roots in Calcutta, did not end. Mujib returned to a war ravaged Bangladesh on January 10, 1972 from Pakistani prison to inherit a devastated country. The economy was completely ruined and the task at hand was monumental. A day later a new cabinet under the Premiership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib took oath and immediately began the task to put the devastated country on its feet. Shafiqullah was made the army chief superseding Zia which was the beginning of the second phase of the conspiracy, this time including Bangabandhu along with the country.



Zia was an ambitious army officer and he thought it was appropriate that he became the army chief. Somehow Mujib could understand Zia's ambitious character and made his own decision while selecting the army chief. Zia never concealed his discontent at the decision but would always pose as an officer completely loyal to Bangabandhu. Zia would also pleaded with Nurul Islam Chowdhury, the State Minister for Defense, that once the tenure of Shafiqullah was over in December 1975, he should be made the army chief. In an interview given to 1971 war correspondent Musa Sadek, Mr. Chowdhury disclosed that one day, either on August 4th or 5th 1975, he and Zia were having a meeting in his office when Bangabandhu called him over red telephone to tell him that Shafiqullah's

tenure had been extended and his ministry should immediately notify it through a gazette. Zia overheard the conversation and asked Chowdhury whether it was a call from Bangabandhu announcing the extension of Shafiqullah's tenure? When Chowdhury answered in the affirmative Zia immediately asked for a paper on which he wrote his resignation and requested it be sent immediately to the President. Chowdhury tried to calm Zia down and promised that he would take up the matter with the President. But Zia was not convinced and left the meeting. Chowdhury immediately called Bangabandhu and told him about Zia's resignation. Bangabandhu told Chowdhury to send over the letter and said that in the military there should not be any hesitation in taking a decision. But

televised interview after the killing of Bangabandhu, that they discussed the plot of removing Bangabandhu from power with Zia in March. Zia consented to it but told them that he could not be part of the implementation process as he was a responsible senior officer. Zia was the main beneficiary of Bangabandhu's killing.

Mujib was appraised by different quarters including Indian intelligence sources that something was not right in the army. However, Mujib refused to believe that a conspiracy to unseat him was in the making.

From leaked documents and from independent researchers it is now clear that the US Embassy in Dhaka was also in the loop of the conspiracy. Kissinger made a short trip to Bangladesh on October 30th, 1974 and met Bangabandhu. Kissinger did not disclose what transpired between the two leaders but said that what ever aid was given to Bangladesh most of that was wasted. This was thought to be a green signal to the would be assassins that things were going in their favour. Earlier, when Mujib met US President Gerald Ford at the White House, Kissinger refused to be in the meeting as per protocol. He had a personal dislike for Bangabandhu.

Besides the hyper activities of the conspirators and US Embassy, Pakistan's notorious ISI was also active in destabilizing Bangladesh. They established contacts with the extreme rightists and pro-Chinese elements in Bangladesh. Comrade Abdul Hoque of Bangladesh Communist Party (M-L) wrote to Bhutto on 16th December 1973, addressing him as 'My dear Prime Minister,' and requesting him to give him fund, arms and wireless equipment to unseat the 'puppet' regime of Mujib. Bhutto wrote in the letter that Abdul Hoque was an honest person and he should be given all possible assistance as he desired. Bhutto entrusted his trusted lieutenant Abdul Malek to 'destabilize Bangladesh.' Malek travelled the Arab countries with Maulana Kawsar Niazi, one of Bhutto's advisors, to convince the leaders in the region that Mujib needed to be removed. Stanley Wolpert, the American researcher has all these and other issues vividly discussed in his well documented book 'Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan.'

Mujib was no superman. He was a statesman before his arrest on the night of March 26th 1971. On January 10th he returned to his country as a hero and began the gigantic task of rebuilding the war devastated nation. Due to his failings in understanding the depth of the conspiracy hatched against him, he fell to the bullets of the assassins and became a martyr. History will remember him as person who loved his country and its people - perhaps too much. Long live his memory. Heroes live for ever.

The writer is the Chairman, University Grants Commission, and Bangladesh. August 13, 2015

THE SHEPHERD KING OF HISTORY

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

IN 1995, two reputed constitutional lawyers of Canada while analysing the legalities of the possible separation of Quebec from Canada, observed, "After 1945, Bangladesh was the only country of the world which successfully seceded from Pakistan through armed struggle. However, the principal strength of that struggle came from the unparalleled election victory of Awami League led by its charismatic leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The popular support he enjoyed was unheard of in a Western Democracy".

The New York Times magazine writer Peggy Durdin, who was in Dhaka since February 28, 1971 wrote an article, 'The Political Tide Wave that Struck East Pakistan' (Published May 2, 1971), where she wrote: "All during March, Sheikh Mujib and his aides seemed to be playing devious games and refusing to be candid about their aims and strategy. In fairness, it must be said that this was the only tactic open to them, since an open stand for independence would have made them immediately liable to charge of treason... Sheikh Mujib never showed the slightest interest in being a national leader of East and West, of taking the position of the Prime Minister of an all Pakistan government that the Assembly majority entitled him to".

General Rao Forman Ali, however, had different views. He noted, "At last, they (Bengalis) thought of the possibility of ruling Pakistan. Mujib wanted to be the Prime Minister (of Pakistan). (But after the postponement of the National Assembly) He came to the conclusion that the combined forces of the Military and the PPP would not let materialise his desire to be the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Therefore, he decided to be the FATHER of a new nation".

James J Novak, who lived in Bangladesh for 20 years since 1970, in his beautiful book Bangladesh: Reflections on the Water presented a brilliant depiction of Sheikh Mujib as the politician and the leader of our independence movement. In the words of Novak, "Sheikh Mujib brought an immediacy to the political environment. He never tired the people by sophisticated plays or half-measures. He had no love for the government office. While he never said so on record, from the time he emerged until the time the Pakistanis arrested him on the day the liberation war began, everyone knew he spoke for independence. Not by proclaiming his end, he scared the Pakistanis. And all the while, Mujib could wink and smile and speak of

Bengal, and of Bangladesh, as though it were free to rejoice in green-and-red flags fluttering on rooftops".

However, the ground for this transition from six-point to one point did not happen in a day or a month. In the words of Novak, "Long before the Liberation War, Mujib assumed for East Bengal the mantle of poor victims of Pakistani aggression thereby giving Bengalis the moral exultation of blameless. Whatever his beliefs, it was his personality that made him the pivotal figure of his era. He represented an elemental force, a comet in politics. Basically, he was an intuitive force, one whose personality and action inspired the pit of Bangladesh mind. His desire for independence radiated as much from the people as it did from his own intellectual outlook. He proved to be a vessel through which the people's desire were to flow".

As Socrates long ago recognised, poets are really rhetoricians, politicians, who appeal to emotive as well as reasoned positions. In the words of Novak, "Mujib also played up the superiority of Bengali culture compared to that of military and martial Pakistani Punjabis. Thus, he countered Hindu and Muslim Bengali poetry to that of the great poet of Pakistan Mohammad Iqbal, who had been the inspiration of an independent Muslim state, while relying on the verses of the son-of-the-soil Kazi Nazrul Islam. Mujib understood the aural and artistic quality of Bengali mind and the role of poetry in explicating moral positions. As there is a saying, 'Bengalis never believe anything until there is a poet to articulate it'. He emphasised the works of Tagore, the only Bengali poet equal to Iqbal, who was a Bengali native son and much beloved. Ultimately, so effective was Mujib's poet-tactic that the Pakistani government tried to ban as subversive the singing of Tagore songs. Of course, that is what had been intended".

Referring to his hard work and simplicity, Novak observed, "The Muslim Leaguers, Anglified and Westernised, felt more at home in London than Dhaka, in airplanes than in country boats. As for the Sheikh, hard work shaped his style. Indefatigable, he walked across fields from village to village, and mingled with the people, sharing his tea, rice, dhal, and salt, remembering names, praying at mosques, sweating in fields, visiting flood sites, weeping at funerals and milads. He empathized mightily, instituted sympathetically, and reached out and touched - not golf clubs and club chairs but the people's sweaty hands. He knew what the people believed because he could explain things not only in terms they could understand but in one they respected. Knowing that, they believed

he did not need to lie".

During the nine-months of genocide, amidst armed struggles and untold sufferings, Sheikh Mujib's name glowed ceaselessly in the hearts of millions and he remained a demigod to the people of Bangladesh. In the words of General Rao Forman Ali, "90 percent of the people of Bangladesh were taken in by the magical power of Sheikh Mujib, and they were ready to sacrifice their lives for the creation of Bangladesh".

In the world-wide survey of BBC Bengali service listeners, while he was voted the greatest Bengali ever born, BBC surmised the opinions of the listeners as follows: "He was the beacon in the darkness that had befallen on the Bengali people during the semi-colonial Pakistani era. His political wisdom, uncompromising leadership for the cause of the Bengalis united the Bengali people, for the first time in history, not only within the geographical boundaries of Bangladesh, but all over the world, and gave them nationhood. Bengalis all over the world, who cherish the citizenship of Bangladesh, owe this nationhood to the leadership of one person and he is no other than Sheikh Mujibur Rahman".

The tragic hero, Aristotle wrote, suffers a change in fortune because of a mistaken act to which is led by his "error in judgement" or his "tragic flaw". Such a man moves us to pity because his misfortune is greater than he deserves. Mujib was indeed a tragic hero.

A Turkish saying that Kamal Ataturk was fond of quoting: "History is ruthless to him who is without ruthlessness". This was echoed in the epitaph of the book, Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy where the author S A Karim concluded, "Mujib sought to put the interest of his countrymen before his own. If he failed, it was mainly because he lacked ruthlessness without which a state cannot be governed in difficult times. But his failure as a ruler does not diminish his grandeur as a human being. He will live in the hearts of his countrymen".

Let me conclude with an excerpt from Novak's book. In the words of Novak, "He was a very simple man with a simple set of beliefs in his nation and people. If he failed, people never betrayed him and only brought out the best in him. Yet he is BANGABANDHU, the FATHER OF THE NATION—not as a perfect statesman, but as a man who felt deeply about his people. He was man who flew as high as a man can fly. How many of us would have done better?"

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