

Who was a liar - Yahya or Bhutto?

SHAKHAWAT LITON

BOTH General Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto were desperate to 'finish off' Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Things were moving in their desired direction, according to the conspiracy they had hatched.

British writer and historian Robert Payne writes in his book *Massacre* that in July, Yahya said his generals were putting pressure on him for holding the trial of Bangabandhu in a military tribunal and to sentence him to death. "I am agreed with them and the trial will begin soon," Payne writes.

Payne, in his other book *The Tortured and the Damned*, exposed how the power hungry Bhutto consented to the plan to execute Mujib.

Pakistani military ruler Yahya Khan announced in a televised address to the nation on August 3 in 1971 that Sheikh Mujib would be tried. A day before, a press note issued by the office of the chief martial law administrator announced that Sheikh Mujib had waged a war against Pakistan, and thus would be tried in a military court on charges of treason. The same day, on August 2, General Yahya formed a military court that began the trial of Sheikh Mujib on August 11. The court, on December 4, delivered the verdict convicting Mujib of all the charges and sentenced him to death.

There was no scope for challenging the military court verdict by filing any appeal. What was needed for the execution of the verdict was the approval of the chief martial law administrator, an office held by President Yahya Khan himself.

But the imminent defeat of the Pakistani army in the Liberation War delayed the execution. And the surrender of the Pakistani army in Dhaka on December 16 changed the entire game. Even Bhutto himself reportedly changed his mind, as Payne writes in *The Tortured and the Damned*, citing conversations between Yahya and Bhutto at the very end of the war.

Bhutto argued against the execution of Bangabandhu, according to Payne, but Yahya resolved that he would not release Sheikh Mujib until his last breath. Bhutto inquired whether Mujib was alive or not. In reply, Yahya said, "He [Mujib] is alive. There will be a public announcement when he will be executed," Payne writes.

The declassified diplomatic cables of the US embassy in Pakistan sent to the Department of State, however, show the real reasons behind

Bhutto's change of mind. Bhutto had planned to use Mujib as a bargaining chip with Bangladesh and India for the release of the thousands of Pakistani prisoners of war India held following the surrender in East Pakistan, US ambassador Joseph S. Farland informed the Department of State in a telegram on December 20, 1971.

The defeat of the Pakistan army was like a blessing for Pakistan People's Party leader Bhutto, a politician who had always been hungry for power.

vanquished general. Yahya was held in captivity for a long time, firstly incommunicado in a forest bungalow and then later, in his own residence.

In the wake of tremendous pressure from the world, Bhutto, who was also foreign minister of the Yahya government, released Bangabandhu from captivity in West Pakistan after about 10 months.

But later, Yahya and Bhutto, the two key players in masterminding the genocide in Bangladesh,



General Yahya Khan arrives at Mohenjo Daro airport in January, 1971 to hold talks with Bhutto.

He now conspired with some senior army generals to oust General Yahya from the presidency to grab the state power. Sensing the conspiracy, a general close to Yahya tried to depute an elite commando unit, possibly to arrest Bhutto as he returned from abroad. But the plan did not see the light of the day, as junior officers simply ignored the request.

Bhutto grabbed power, becoming the president of West Pakistan, and also assumed the office of the chief martial law administrator on December 20. Bhutto, who conspired with Yahya Khan to deny Bangabandhu power even after his party Awami League won a majority in the general election in 1970, did not show any mercy for the

blamed each other for insisting on the execution of Bangabandhu. Later, at a meeting with Mujib, Bhutto told him that when Yahya was handing power over to Bhutto, he suggested that Mujib be hanged. "Mr. Bhutto, I've created the greatest blunder of not killing Sheikh Mujibur Rahman," Bangabandhu cited Yahya telling Bhutto, when he spoke to journalist David Frost upon his return home in January, 1972.

"Now, kindly allow me, before handing over power, to kill Mujibur Rahman giving anti-date, back-date-hanging now, and then hand over power. But Mr. Bhutto refused," Bangabandhu told Frost.

Bhutto said that he could not allow this, as it would lead to serious consequences. One lakh twenty thousand armed forces and civilians were arrested in Bengal and were in the hands of allied forces of Bangladesh and the Indian Army, and about five or ten lakh non-Bangalis were in Bangladesh.

"If you [Yahya] kill Mujibur Rahman now and I take over power, not a single soul will come from Bangladesh to West Pakistan again and there will be a reaction in West Pakistan and my position will be precarious," Mujib said, quoting Bhutto.

General Yahya, however, dismissed all the claims made by Bhutto to stop the execution of Mujib.

Ardesheer Cowasjee, a Pakistani newspaper columnist and social activist, disclosed the contents of Yahya's journal in an article published in *Dawn* on September 4, 2000. In Yahya's diary entry on May 27, 1976, the deposed military ruler labelled Bhutto as a liar. He claimed that Bhutto was desperate to have Sheikh Mujib executed all along, asserting that Bhutto loathed Mujib to such an extent that when he was going to Iran in October 1971 to attend the 2,500th anniversary of Iran's monarchy, he told him to wind up the military court's proceedings quickly and 'finish off' Mujib.

"I told him that until the proceedings of the court are finalised, I cannot make a decision. He said that in Iran, all sorts of pressures would be brought against him by the heads of state to let off Mujib, so I must act at once and hang him," claimed Yahya in his journal.

When he was handing over power to Bhutto on December 20, 1971, Yahya claimed that he told his successor that the proceedings of the military court have been received and were being examined by the law ministry before he could take a final decision. "The way he [Bhutto] told the nation that I had ordered the execution of Mujib and that he had saved him! Lies! Lies! Lies! But then what else could be expected from a master liar?" Yahya wrote in his diary.

Given the above discussion, it is clear that after the defeat of the Pakistani army in the war, both General Yahya and Bhutto denied their role in trying to get Bangabandhu executed. If one was telling the truth, then the other was telling a lie. Who was a liar - Yahya or Bhutto, or both?

The writer is a Senior Reporter, *The Daily Star*.

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Reflections of a former Indian foreign minister

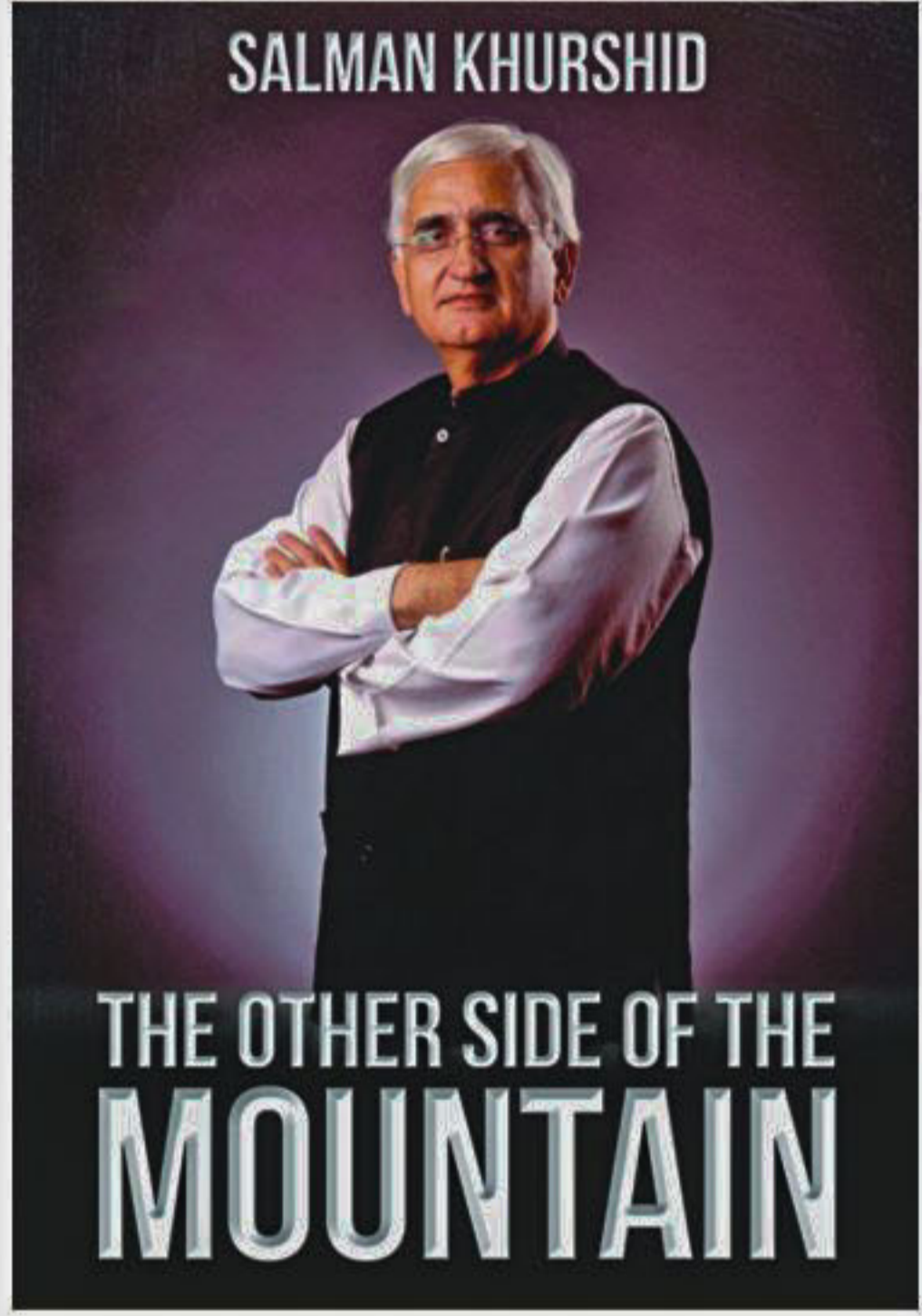
PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

IT is one thing to be a key cabinet minister in a government and quite another once the trappings of power are gone. Does a politician become wiser by hindsight when he or she is out of power to form opinions on the domestic governance and foreign policy issues that had confronted his government? This question is bound to crop up time and again as one reads senior Congress party politician and former Indian Foreign and Law Minister Salman Khurshid's latest book *The Other Side of the Mountain* (Hay House India, Rs 699).

Khurshid was among the key policy-framers of the Congress party and one of its best legal brains who had a ringside view of all the happenings in the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government headed by Manmohan Singh for a decade, from May 2004, before being voted out of power in the 2014 general elections. Khurshid can, therefore, legitimately claim his book to be an "authoritative, forthright and thought-provoking narrative" on several issues, including why Congress lost the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. He had key portfolios in the government and was privy to crucial behind-the-scenes developments that had a profound impact on several issues, including India's foreign policy.

The book analyses what had gone wrong in the Congress-led UPA government's handling of several domestic and foreign policy issues. Khurshid is critical of his own government's actions on these issues but, like a hard-nosed politician, refrains from pointing fingers at any of his ministerial colleagues.

For Bangladeshi readers, the most interesting portion of the book is undoubtedly the space Khurshid devotes to how he and the UPA government had handled relations with Dhaka during his 18-month tenure as India's Foreign Minister since October 2012. One of the first and foremost tasks Khurshid was asked to do by the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was to



focus on India's relations with its immediate neighbours.

Khurshid acknowledges what has been in public domain informally since long - about the importance of India's neighbourhood - that the standard yardstick considered necessary for becoming India's top diplomat, the country's Foreign Secretary, is the experience of the candidate on India's neighbours.

Khurshid makes it clear in the book that he had been given ample space on most foreign policy issues, especially when it came to dealing with India's most immediate neighbours, including Bangladesh. "As external affairs minister," writes Khurshid, "I had a pretty free run on most matters, with the prime minister taking special interest in the neighbourhood, our rediscovery of America, the

millennium conversation with China and the excitement of keeping pace with Japan."

The general perception in India is that the Congress Party has had traditionally close ties with Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League in Bangladesh, and the relations between Delhi and Dhaka have always been on the upswing whenever AL was in power. There are historical reasons for this, the most important being the Bangladesh Liberation War led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the role played by Indira Gandhi in espousing the cause of the war, and the close ties between Bangabandhu's daughter Hasina and her family with Congress' first family, the Gandhis. This, however, did not mean that India did not remain engaged whenever a non-AL government was in power in Bangladesh.

Personal rapport, as Khurshid argues in his book, does play an important role in relations between leaderships of two countries, but diplomacy is mostly based on enlightened national interests rather than personal likes or dislikes.

So, when Khurshid began his mission of concentrating on dealing with India's immediate neighbours, the very first task for him was challenging - a visit by the Chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Khaleda Zia, to New Delhi in October-November, 2012. The book talks about how delicately India has had to handle its relations with Bangladesh, in the light of the bitter political rivalry between Awami League and BNP.

"...As I looked around, there was a virtual storm brewing in Bangladesh between the Awami League Government of Sheikh Hasina (the incumbent prime minister) and the belligerent opposition led by Begum Khaleda Zia. Coincidentally, Khaleda Zia was to be the guest of the Ministry of External Affairs barely 24 hours after I took over from my predecessor S. M. Krishna," Khurshid writes in the book.

Khurshid says that he and Begum Zia "struck up a warm personal rapport in a short while and I was able to arrange for her to call on President Pranab Mukherjee on her return to New Delhi

after the ziarat to Ajmer Sharif. She (Begum Zia) was very keen that she get that call and we had to carefully calculate whether it would have a negative impact on our excellent relations with her arch-rival Sheikh Hasina." It is common knowledge in the political circles in Delhi that Pranab Mukherjee has excellent personal relations with Hasina and her family since long.

The MEA, says Khurshid in his book, "felt that we had made a breakthrough and broken the ice with Begum Khaleda Zia, our relations with whom had been frosty earlier. This was confirmed when I visited Bangladesh some months later and was fortunate to be received by Begum Khaleda Zia very warmly, who offered a sumptuous assortment of pastries and other delicacies for high tea." Khurshid also recalls that Begum Zia "made a conspicuous departure from her standard practice to remain present when I spoke to the media outside her drawing room."

But all those initial signs of positive vibes melted away "as events in Bangladesh turned to ugly confrontation on the streets between the government supporters and the young aspirational nationalists on one side and the Jamaat-e-Islami radicals on the other (and) we were virtually squeezed into the Awami League camp," says Khurshid in his book.

India had to make a choice. As Khurshid says in the book, "there was a real danger of falling between two stools and losing the momentum of the impressive achievements we had been able to make. But what the Awami League needed urgently before the general election (eventually held in January 2014) was the deal on Teesta water sharing (a deal yet to be reached) and the exchange of enclaves." Ironically, while the exchange of enclaves happened a year later - in June 2015 with Congress out of power - the Teesta deal still remains elusive even though there is consensus on the issue between India's two main political players - Congress and BJP.

The writer is New Delhi correspondent of *The Daily Star*.

The book analyses what had gone wrong in the Congress-led UPA government's handling of several domestic and foreign policy issues.

QUOTABLE Quote

DAVID BOWIE
(Legendary musician and actor)

don't know where I'm going from here, but I promise it won't be boring.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS 43 Lamarr of Hollywood

DOWN

- Jellied dish
- Snapshots
- Takes notice
- Clean Water Act org.
- Tex-Mex snack
- "That's gross!"
- Grimacing, perhaps
- Tack on
- Jai Alai baskets
- Hot, in a way
- Complete turnaround
- Wrinkly fruit
- Faithful
- Jason's quest
- Rascals
- Phone feature
- Zoo resident
- Dream up
- Made malicious remarks
- Fresh
- Sacred chests
- Toronto's prov.
- Derisive cry

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	W	A	P	F	L	A	S	H	E
L	A	R	E	L	A	P	H	E	D
A	R	E	A	L	A	M	P	E	R
S	T	U	C	K	U	P	L	O	X
H	Y	P	H	E	N	S	L	I	T
P	E	T	B	E	N	E			
A	S	K	I	N	O	R	D	E	R
C	H	I	T	B	A	A			
C	A	R	B	I	R	D	M	A	N
O	K	S	I	N	S	P	I	R	E
R	E	T	O	L	I	S	E	E	
D	R	E	D	G	E	T	E	N	D
S	N	E	E	R	T	R	A	Y	

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

I THINK I'LL TAKE A NAP

HOW CAN YOU DO THAT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY?

WHEN I START TO HEAR HIS SNORES

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

I WISH I HAD A PET.

A DOG?

NO.

A CAT?

NO. I WAS THINKING OF A DUNG BEETLE THAT I'D NAME 'ZOE.'

MOM!

ANNY GISTER.. CHECK!