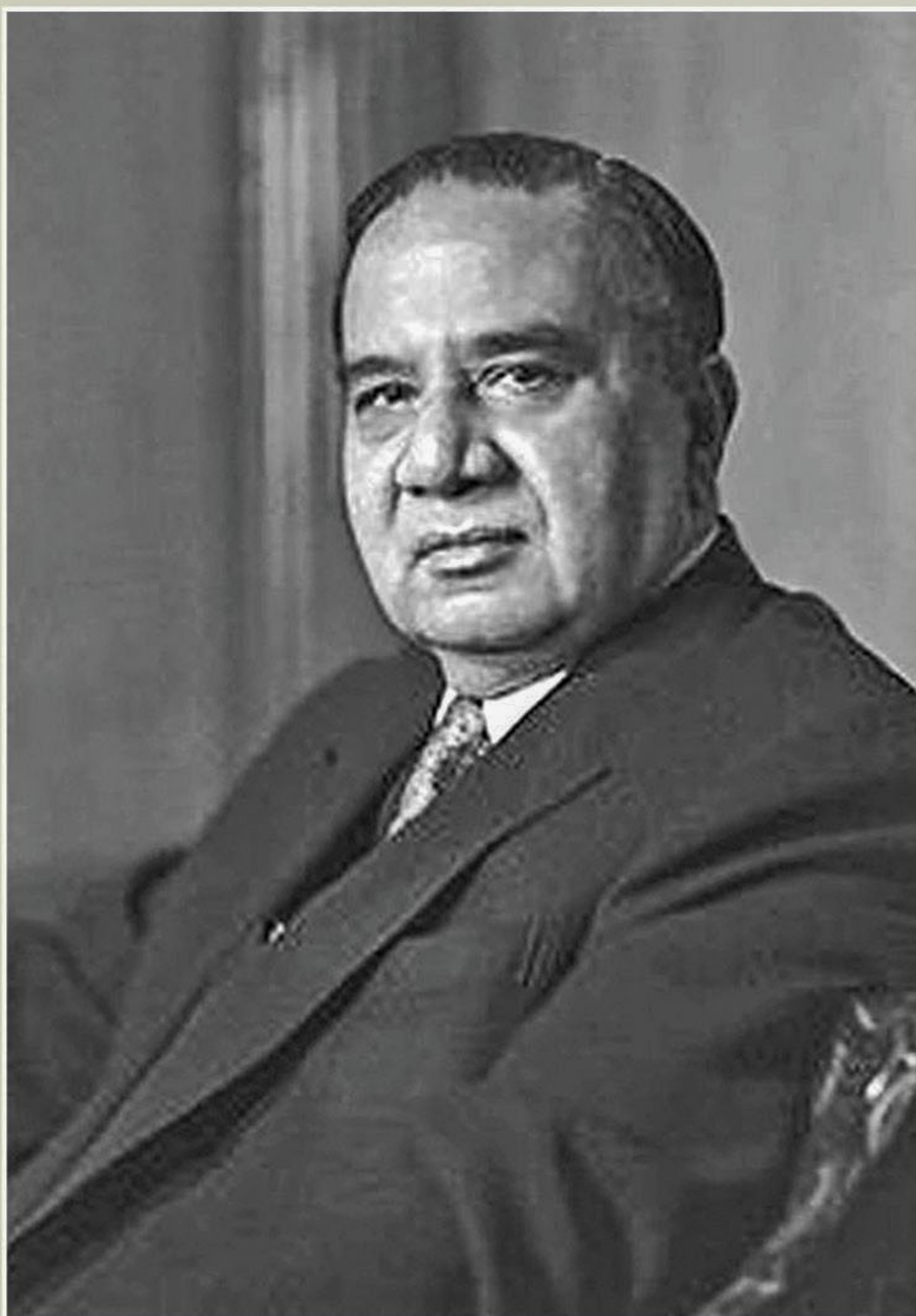


# HUSEYIN SHAHEED SUHRAWARDY: AN ICON OF DEMOCRACY

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*Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, known for his pivotal role in championing democracy in the Indian subcontinent, was born into an illustrious family in Midnapore in the then Bengal (now part of West Bengal in India) on September 8, 1892. Interestingly, his family's ancestral home was the city of Suhraward in Iraq, from which it drew its surname Suhrawardy. The founder of the family in Iraq was Sheikh Shahabuddin Suhrawardy who, from his father's side, was a descendent of Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiqui, the first Caliph of Islam and from his mother's side, of Hazrat Ali, a son-in-law of the holy Prophet and the fourth Caliph of Islam, making him both a Siddiqui and a Syed.*



Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy.

PHOTO: STAR

The Suhrawardy family of Midnapore, however, is known for having initiated the Islamic renaissance movement in Bengal. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's father, Barrister Zahid Suhrawardy, was knighted after his retirement from the Bar. His mother, Begum Khozesta Akhter Banu, was the first Muslim woman to pass the Senior Cambridge Examination and having graduated with honours in Persian Literature from the Indian Board of Examinations, appointed as an examiner for Urdu literature at the University of Calcutta

with giving birth to the idea of Bengali nationalism and of getting the Bengal Provincial Assembly to adopt the Labour Welfare Act and the Maternity Benefit Act in 1937, later to be constitutionally adopted all over India.

In terms of his personality, Ataur Rahman Khan, Prime Minister of Bangladesh from March 1984 to January 1985 said, "It was both mild and firm, cold and grim, simple and complex." He was also a very generous man, according to Tofazzal Hossain, editor of *The Ittefaq*, who wrote, "Generally rich

Suhrawardy paid them a total monthly pension of Rs. 3,000. Among the pensioners, irrespective of religion, were old servants, barbers, labourers, some old writers and political workers".

Having described his mentor C. R. Das as "a great son of Bengal", Abul Mansur Ahmed commented, "The greatness and magnitude of their [Das and Suhrawardy] life mission was on the same level". Such was his devotion towards the quest for democracy and the well-being of the people that he joined politics after returning to the

riots in Calcutta, he travelled all around the city, trying to save its vulnerable people while risking his own life in the process, as he is known to have done, during the entirety of his life. In 1931, following the North Bengal flood, he worked untiringly to ease the suffering of the people where, perhaps, it was fate that led him to meet another great man in his own accord, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. Although the two did not always see eye-to-eye, they had considerable respect for each other and had worked together on many

steadfast attempt to end communal violence forced even his critic, Hassan Ispahani to say that "I have not seen a man work so hard and act so swiftly to try and control conflagration as Suhrawardy did".

During the entire mission, Suhrawardy received constant threats to his life. On one occasion, when a crowd of 20,000 people came to kill him, he said, "If you want to kill me, kill me now, but, before you kill me, you've got to give me your word that after killing me you'll kill no other Muslims". Hearing the commotion, Gandhi came out and asked the crowd to kill him first, before killing Suhrawardy. Upon hearing this from the Mahatma, the crowd dispersed.

Although Suhrawardy had held many of the highest positions in government, including the Prime Ministership of Pakistan, he was always seen as the peoples' leader. Having worked with Suhrawardy, even the great Mahatma is reported to have said, "Jinnah, there is your statesman; Liaquat, there is your politician; Suhrawardy, there is your leader".

And it was this leadership quality of his, along with his love for the people, and his willingness to sacrifice everything at their behest, that pitted him, often, against some of the most powerful forces in Pakistan. Yet, against all these forces, his perseverance finally won him the day, when the first constitution of Pakistan was ultimately finalised on February 29, 1956, with Suhrawardy signing it as the opposition leader.

Tragically, however, Suhrawardy passed away on December 5, 1963 in Beirut, where he had gone for treatment, away from the land and its people, for which he had so ardently fought. The people, however, refused to let his memories wither away. As Abul Hashim, a Bengali politician commented, "He died a magnificent pauper, receiving the burial of an Emperor". Even the national flag of Pakistan was lowered to half mast when he died, despite Pakistan being ruled, at the time, by some of his most severe adversaries, a rare honour granted to any opposition leader.

The land which he fought for too, accepted his remains gracefully, and he was buried in the old High Court compound of Dhaka, next to the graves of A. K. Fazlul Haque and Khwaja Nazimuddin. Yet, the greatest honour that was, perhaps, bestowed on Suhrawardy, was arguably granted to him by the people, who carried on, courageously, the fight for democracy, which he had commenced, and is being carried on by them, continually, to this day.

*The writer is a member of the editorial team.*

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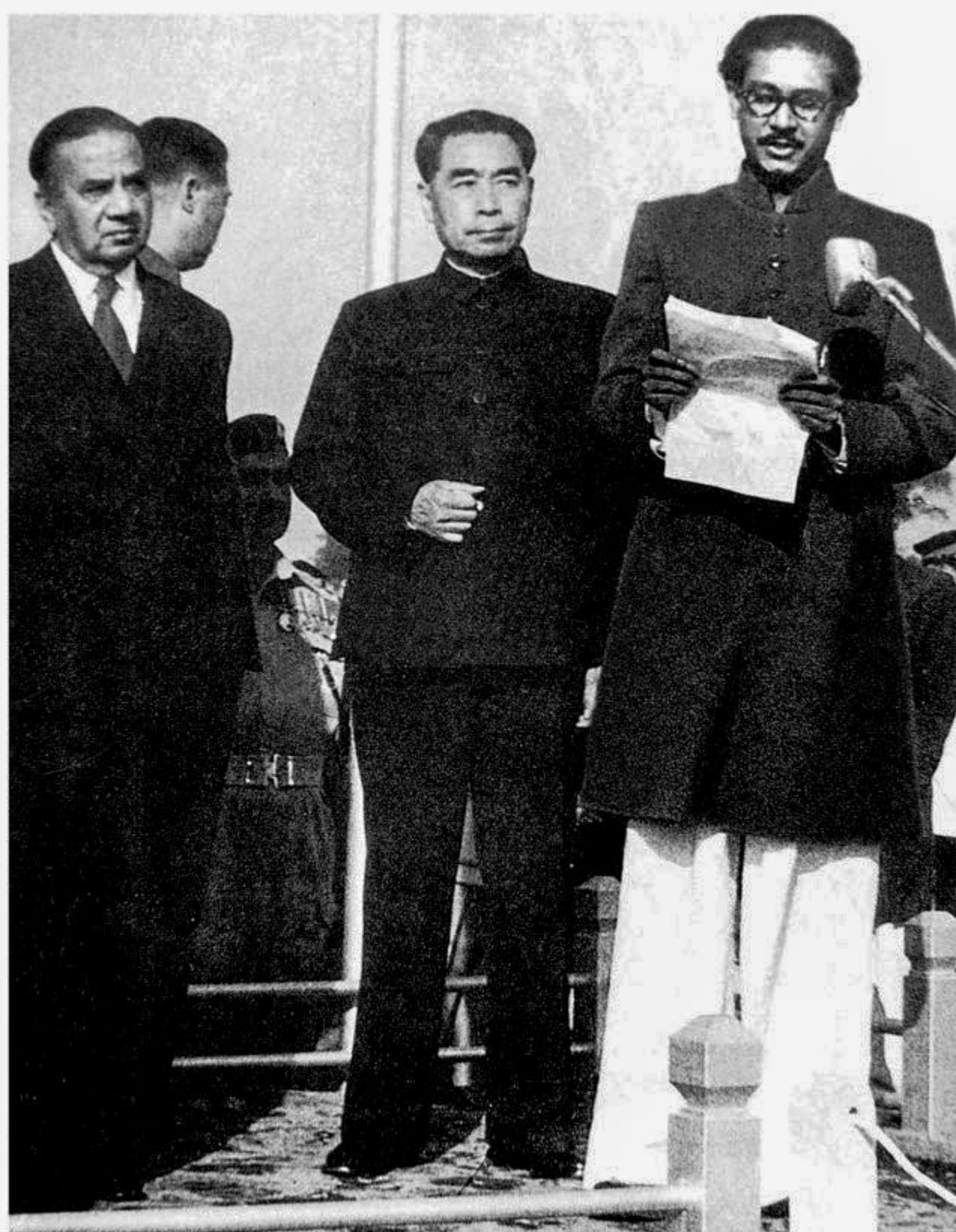
When the Muslim League was becoming a fascist entity, together, they formed the Jukto Front on November 13, 1953. Yet, it was Suhrawardy who had earlier played a major role for the Muslim League, particularly in its pursuit for the creation of Pakistan. For had he not won the 1946 provincial election in Bengal, given the failure of the Muslim League to win any other Muslim majority provinces, Pakistan would never have come into being. This led some to admit that "his contributions to the creation of the new country [Pakistan] was second to none".

Yet, following the partition of India, instead of enjoying a life of position and peace in a country he helped create, when asked by the Muslims in Calcutta to stay with them during the violence of 1947, Suhrawardy sought out the great Mahatma Gandhi, and went on a peace mission with him in an attempt to stop the communal violence that threatened to engulf parts of India. Suhrawardy's



Political rivals, Khawja Nazimuddin and Prime Minister of Pakistan Suhrawardy, shown in a relaxed setting together, Karachi, 1957.

PHOTO: LIFE MAGAZINE/  
 COURTESY: WAQAR A. KHAN



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with his mentor H. S. Suhrawardy and Chinese premier Zhou Enlai in Dhaka, 1957.

COURTESY: WIKIPEDIA

— the only Indian lady at the time to have received this honour.

Descending from a family of pioneers, Shaheed Suhrawardy too was a spearhead of new ideas and achievements. After studying Law and Jurisprudence at Oxford University, receiving the coveted B.C.L. degree and completing his Bar-at-Law from Gray's Inn in 1918, he became the first Muslim to be elected as the Deputy Mayor of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation in 1924, with his mentor, C. R. Das, as Mayor. Additionally, he is also credited

people forget and avoid their poor relatives. But it was different with Shaheed Suhrawardy. He searched them out, visited their cottages, never hesitated to have meals with them and helped them generously". The same trait has also been attributed to him by one of his favourite prodigies, who himself later became a shaper of history and a champion of the people, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who remarked, "When in Calcutta, I accidentally saw a black notebook. It contained, among others, a list of pensioners.

subcontinent in 1921 and worked tirelessly till his death. This self-sacrificing nature of his was evident in his letter to the Editor of the *Daily-Ittefaq* only six days prior to his passing away, when, after having all sorts of obstacles thrown in his way by those seeking power and looking to eradicate people's democratic rights, he wrote, "If I die, I shall be happy. There is no point in living. I am of no further use to anybody — and if use (only) to myself then this life is not worth living."

True to those words during the 1926