

FROM SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN TO OUR BANGABANDHU

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

Bangali people made headlines from Dhaka to Islamabad. Ayyub Khan had unknowingly dug his country's own grave. He gave Sheikh Mujib the perfect platform to decree himself a hero for Bangalis. By refusing to accede to Mujib's 6-point Movement of 1966, and by making him an enemy of the Pakistani state, Ayub Khan had construed the modern day Bangabandhu. And the charming, charismatic and vibrant politician in Mujib took over. He used the Pakistani legal machinery's tirade on him as a forum to tell the people of East Pakistan that his beloved country was being deprived of the economic, legal, cultural and democratic justice that it deserved. He used the failures of the Pakistani Government and glorified the Agartala Conspiracy Case as representing a victory for the Bangali people. And it was surely a brilliant political move.

Bangabandhu's victory meant the automatic demise of General Ayub Khan from the Pakistani Presidency. Demonstrations, riots and protests were already underway in West Pakistan against the Ayub regime's inability to control food prices. There were widespread factions in the military which were making soundbites in their lack of approval towards their Commander-in-Chief. The Agartala Case on the other hand had moved East Pakistanis against him. By failing to make Mujib the villain, Khan resigned on 25 March 1969, after 11 years of stringent rule. His successor, President Yahya Khan, was to be the last President of united Pakistan.

In recent times, many of the co-accused in regard to the Agartala Conspiracy Case have come forward. Former Parliamentary Deputy Speaker Shawkat Ali confessed to the Jatiyo Sangsad that the charges read out to them were accurate. There are some who suggest Sheikh Mujib himself led the so called Shangram Parishad for the secession of East Pakistan. Yet, amidst all this, Bangabandhu became the hero. The Bangalis had been fed up with the civil maltreatment of East Pakistan. East Pakistanis were tired of the lack of democracy and the ruthlessness of the dictatorial regime. Democracy meant autonomy. Autonomy meant democracy. Agartala showcased why such was the only viable long-term political solution. And no one did more to find political solutions than Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself. From deliberating with Ayub Khan to sitting with Yahya Khan, Mujib tried his best to ensure peaceful resolutions to what he very much believed were political crisis'. To try and make Mujib the villain to his own people, was simply impossible for a President who had used the military, and not his people, to remain in power for 11 years. To try and make a mockery of a man who had stood for the people, was a scheme which disastrously failed for Ayub Khan.

While it may be too naïve to suggest that the Agartala Case gave Sheikh Mujibur Rahman the final impetus to demand independence, it did show him that the central Government in West Pakistan considered East Pakistanis a plausible threat to Pakistan. As such, hoping for a united, equitable and democratic Pakistan was purely utopian for many Bangalis. The

demand for secession had received the kind of traction which allowed Mujib to win a majority of seats in the subsequent 1970 General Elections. In the immediate post-Agartala period, the people said a resounding yes to Mujib, and a defiant no to Ayub. They said yes to the values inscribed in Bangali nationalism which stands tall today as a tenant of Bangladesh's constitutional structure. It is no doubt that the Agartala Conspiracy Case remains an iconic moment in the political history of Bangladesh. Our Bangabandhu was at his peak.

The 1970 Parliamentary Elections were a clear result of the wills and wishes of the people. Needless to say, that it was Bangabandhu's sole passion and vibrancy which attracted East Pakistan, into voting him into office. Yet as we know now, the Yahya regime never intended to hand over power to the Prime-Minister Elect. The

book, it would be difficult to think about the independence of Bangladesh without recognising its chief architect.

Today, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is used as a tool for political points by the Awami League. His name is a reference which garners attention, his face is plastered against all kinds of posters. He has effectively been monopolised by his beloved party. And that is the saddest possible tale for a sovereign nation such as ours. One of the great things which made Sheikh Mujib our Bangabandhu was his ability to reach out to even those with whom he disagreed. It is for this reason that even with his biggest opponents such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Yahya Khan, Mujib remained ever cordial and dignified. It is for this reason that he thought of his own killers as his sons. If we as a country try to simply categorise him as the leader of the Awami League, we are not only demeaning him, but blatantly disregarding

which would bring slow and constitutional changes in the structure of the Pakistani state. It was a form of proposed confederation whose ultimate destination would be an independent Bangladesh. Now did Mujib foresee the kind of war which Yahya Khan initiated? One doubts it. His entire efforts during 1970 and 1971 were based on a non-military and democratic transference of legitimate authority, and when he realised that this was being prevented, he did whatever he could to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis. As any great statesman, Sheikh Mujib did not want a war and for that we should recognise his gravity as a political leader. But when it came to it on March 25th, Mujib left the country knowing that he had done enough to inspire his people to take up arms and defend themselves to the best of their ability.

Today as we celebrate Independence Day, we look forward to the great years



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Maulana Bhashani

camouflaged discussions and deliberations was a means of getting military personnel into East Pakistan. On March 7th, Mujib effectively declared the de-facto declaration of independence. Bangabandhu was at his finest form and his people responded to whatever he asked from them. From non-cooperation to recruiting political workers, East Pakistanis remained totally indebted to their leader. And as such, when the Pakistani Military initiated Operation Searchlight on the night of 25th March and Mujib was unscrupulously arrested, the people of the newly declared independent nation took over. As the 9-month war raged on and Mujib remained confined to a jail cell in Pakistan, one would imagine that he had enough faith in his people to pull off a miraculous victory. Let there be no doubt that defeating the Pakistani military was a miracle, but it was a miracle inspired by one man and one man only. As Moudud Ahmed said in his

the history of contemporary Bangladesh. It is the simple truth that Bangabandhu does not belong to one person or one political party. He is ours. He is for the whole of Bangladesh. And his reach surely goes beyond a single political philosophy.

Another question which commonly arises is that of whether Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would have wanted independence if he had been given the position of Prime Minister. There seems to be a large divide amongst scholars regarding this subject. But first, it is significant to recognise that we as countrymen cannot be rigid when it comes to underscoring our beliefs. Intellectual discussions and debates are healthy for a modern society, and analysing our Founding Father's life is an extension of such. However, to those who question Mujib's aim for independence, one should refer them back to the contents of the 6-Point Movement. It was a clearly constructed, yet peaceful mechanism,

lying ahead for our nation. We recognise our martyrs and those men and women who had tirelessly worked to get Bangladesh independent. However, we must express our gratitude to a man who loved his countrymen more than he loved his family and himself. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became Bangabandhu for a reason, and we as Bangladeshis will do very well to celebrate him for who he was—an icon, a visionary and this country's greatest leader. Bangladesh did have many architects. But it had one chief architect. One without whom the plan for a sovereign Bangladesh would never have been set in motion. Thank you, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, for what you have given us. We hope that we as citizens are making you proud and will make you even prouder in the years to come.

*The writer is 3rd year undergraduate student of Economics and international relations, University of Toronto.
E-mail: aftab.ahmed@mail.utoronto.ca*