

TAJUDDIN AHMAD'S 94TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

A quiet revolutionary and his temple of hope



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

ON April 17, 1971, in the midst of a genocidal operation by the Pakistani forces, a quiet voice of sanity reminded the world what was at stake, and went on to lay the groundwork for an independent Bangladesh. In a message sent out to the "people of the world," Tajuddin Ahmad, the prime minister of the government-in-exile formed earlier in the month, said: "Bangladesh will be the eighth most populous country in the world. Its only goal will be to rebuild a new nation from the ashes and carnage left behind by Yahya's occupation army. It will be a stupendous task because we are already one of the world's poorest nations. But we now have a cause and a people who have been hardened in the resistance, who have shed their blood for their nation and won their freedom in an epic struggle which pitted unarmed people against a modern army. Such a nation cannot fail in its task of securing the foundation of its nationhood." (*Tajuddin Ahmad: Glimpses from History*, edited by Simeen Hussain Rimi)

The grit and candour that painted Tajuddin's picture of a yet-to-be-born Bangladesh speak of a leader whose love for his people was underpinned by a deep sense of duty and an awareness of their collective strength. He took to nation-building even before the birth of the nation. To speak of Tajuddin is to speak of these lofty ideals as well as his revolutionary spirit, which found its most potent expression during the nine-month war of independence. But Tajuddin as a visionary was matched equally by Tajuddin as a pragmatist. His timely rise to the leadership challenge during the war (after Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's arrest in 1971), his organisational acumen, political and diplomatic wisdom, and his ability to navigate the complex challenges of nation-building suggest a blend of vision and pragmatism inherent to great leaders. Tajuddin's career can be divided into



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (left) and Tajuddin Ahmad.

three distinct periods: the time between 1949 (when Bangladesh Awami League was established) and 1970, the 1971 war of which he was the key organiser, and his post-1971 stint as finance and planning minister. The first period was marked by exemplary grassroots activism. If Bangabandhu was the face of our decades-long independence struggle since the creation of Pakistan, Tajuddin was the one relentlessly providing him with backstage support. Their friendship—and eventual falling-out—acquired mythical stature partly because of the expectations surrounding the magic they could create together.

But there is no doubt that the four years between December 7, 1970 (when Tajuddin became a member of the National Assembly of Pakistan after Awami League gained a historic parliamentary majority to form a government) and October 26, 1974 (when he resigned as the minister of finance and planning in independent Bangladesh) marked his golden time in politics. M Matiul Islam, the first finance secretary of Bangladesh, provided a valuable insight

into Tajuddin in a tribute published in 2017. In that, he recounted some personal anecdotes before praising his former boss's judiciousness, "human quality" and his ability to distance himself from politics when it came to administrative decisions.

But unfortunately for Tajuddin, his stint as a statesman came at a time when Bangladesh was grappling with what Frantz Fanon called "the pitfalls of national consciousness," which were typical of all freshly liberated nations.

In his book on the dehumanising effects of colonisation upon newly independent nations titled *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that in the aftermath of independence, the "native bourgeoisie" of former colonies fail to do the necessary nation-building as they are not genuine visionaries, but bureaucrats and technocrats anxious to obtain for themselves the wealth and prestige that once went to the colonial overlords. Imperialism thus leaves behind, he says, "germs of rot" that we must "clinically detect and remove" from both our land and our minds.

Bangladesh had its land rinsed off the Pakistani presence but it still had a mind

moulded in the colonial furnace. Fanon identified the disenfranchisement of the masses by the elites as one of the perils of post-independence politics which, in Bangladesh's case, came through the creation of BAKSAL, in 1975—of which Tajuddin was a reluctant member. He found himself increasingly isolated, mostly because of the corrupting effects of the top-down system that the country inherited from its Pakistani and British masters. There was, evidently, a yawning gap between the Bangladesh of his dream and the Bangladesh that was unfolding. His tragic death on November 3, 1975, shortly after the assassination of Bangabandhu and his family, exemplified, in its most diabolical form, the shattering of that dream.

But leaders like Tajuddin—and, of course, Bangabandhu—have too great an impact on their nations to be overshadowed by their less glorious moments. Tajuddin, in his long, illustrious career, showed that a leader can be both an out-and-out politician and a great statesman at the same time, and it is somewhere in the vicinity of these two highlights of his career that his legacy lies. Bangladesh is still the world's eighth-most populous country, faced with innumerable challenges including poverty, a toxic political culture and a bureaucracy-ridden system that only grew in intensity over time. There are so many things that today's political class can learn from Tajuddin: his triumphs, the examples he set through his work and, not to mention, his gems of political wisdom.

Tajuddin once said: "Too much dependence on foreign loan and assistance erodes the moral confidence of a nation." On another occasion, he said, "For the economic progress of our nation, we need austerity, regulated distribution mechanism, production maximisation, disciplined and well-coordinated fiscal activity." His development vision was built on the principles of self-esteem, self-actualisation and patriotism. He worked quietly, kept his feet on the ground, and was harsh on himself when it came to assessing his performance and that of his administration. Some of his opinions about parliamentary democracy, opposition politics and national unity are

particularly relevant for today's Bangladesh.

"For 23 years," he said, "we had played the role of an opposition party but never did we make indecent comments about our opponents nor did we bring imaginary allegations against them." He also said: "The opposition party is an alternative government. Tolerance and respect for diverse opinion are the bedrock of democracy." Importantly, Tajuddin believed in the politics of hope rather than the politics of fear.

In the final analysis, however, his legacy remains unfinished as the lofty ideals that he held close to his heart remain unfulfilled to date. Any biography of Tajuddin Ahmad inevitably illustrates examples of his failure to cut through the politico-bureaucratic tangle of his day to execute some of his more ambitious projects and schemes. He was misunderstood during his own time, and made all but irrelevant in later years. Tajuddin, as Professor Sardar Fazlul Karim has rightly said, "came much before his time and we are not yet ready to understand him properly."

So how should we remember a man of such an illustrious and multifaceted career? I recall a sermon that Martin Luther King delivered in 1968, just a month before his death. In it, he related the story of Kind David from the Old Testament) David wanted to build a great temple for his people. But, despite all his efforts, he couldn't finish it. So the Lord told him, "Whereas it was in thine heart to build an house unto my name, thou didst well that it was within thine heart." By telling this story, Martin Luther reminded his audience of the many leaders who mounted the challenge of building temples—the things they believed in—but failed ultimately. What we should take away from this example, Luther said, is that they "tried" and that building the temple was foremost on their minds.

Tajuddin set out to build a great temple of hope on the ashes of a war, a temple of peace and justice that would shelter the common man. And he made great strides in building it but in the end, it was left unfinished. The challenge to finish building this temple is up to us—his ideological descendants.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Boris Johnson and the threat to British soft power



GORDON BROWN

SINCE the United Kingdom's Department of International Development (DFID) was created 22 years ago, it has lifted millions out of poverty, sent millions of children to school, and saved millions of lives through

vaccination programmes and other innovative initiatives. Most recently, it has been a world leader in delivering development aid to poor countries facing the ravages of climate change.

Yet under a proposal now being explored by the transition team of the UK's likely next prime minister, Boris Johnson, DFID would be absorbed into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The new PM would be solving one problem—the unacceptable neglect of the British diplomatic service—by creating an even bigger one: the loss of perhaps Britain's greatest global asset today—the soft power it exercises on every continent because of its pathbreaking commitment to ending world poverty.

As other countries have discovered, incorporating their international aid efforts into their external affairs offices harms both diplomatic and development efforts. No one gains when development, which thrives on transparency and external scrutiny, is subsumed by diplomacy, which requires confidentiality and is often marked by poor audit trails.

Of course, the Johnson team thinks it is appealing to a public that, for reasons for which I and others must take at least some responsibility, is not fully acquainted with the facts about what UK development aid can achieve. When asked, British voters seem to

think that around 20 percent of the national budget is spent on overseas aid, when the true figure is closer to 1 percent. British parents are usually shocked to learn that their government's total annual aid budget comes to around 50 pence (USD 0.63) per African schoolchild, which is not even enough for a pen, let alone a teacher or classroom.

Saving DFID is not a partisan issue, for there is remarkable consensus in support of the UK-based Coalition for Global Prosperity, which has shown that diplomacy and development are distinct tasks of equal importance. The FCO, notes Tom Tugendhat, a Conservative MP and Chair of the UK Foreign Affairs Select Committee, is the country's "principle diplomat," and one should "no more expect diplomats to know how to steer the Queen Elizabeth than how to lead on international trade and development."

But there is an even stronger and more urgent argument for supporting an independent DFID. Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill used to describe the United States, Europe, and the Commonwealth as the three concentric circles of British influence. The more influence Britain had in one circle, he argued, the more it would have in the others: when the British have a strong voice in Europe, they are taken more seriously by the Americans.

Yet, in the seven decades since World War II, Britain has too often neglected a fourth circle comprising multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. These institutions' role in global governance is now being challenged by US President Donald Trump's administration, just when international cooperation is most needed to solve common problems. But, because post-1945 Britain



PHOTO: AFP

Boris Johnson gestures during a leadership campaign visit to a nursery in Braintree, southeast England, on July 13, 2019.

feared that stronger multilateral institutions would put even more anti-colonialist pressure on the country as it retreated from empire, we often remained at arm's length. In contrast, France has established significant influence at the IMF, and the Scandinavians have become indispensable in UN peacemaking and development efforts.

The Labour Government of 1997-2010 tried to reassert British influence in this domain. Britain assisted in the creation of two important new institutions: the G20 and the global Financial Stability Board. And if a post-Brexit UK is going to enjoy international influence and be a "global Britain," DFID is vital, as it has established a strong track

record of leading multilateral initiatives in areas ranging from health and education to the environment. In each case, it has managed to punch far above its weight by working with fellow donors and leveraging the capacities of other stakeholders.

Among other things, DFID had a hand in creating the International Finance Facility for Immunization (which has provided vaccines for more than 700 million children since 2000), Global Partners for Health, and a USD 1.5 billion Advanced Market Commitment fund that has financed the development of new drugs in poor countries. Through DFID, the UK is also a leading member of the Global Fund and a top supporter of the new

International Finance Facility for Education that I and others have developed.

It should go without saying that in the absence of a strong DFID, Britain will lack the status to lead in important global multilateral development efforts.

The FCO cannot easily replicate DFID's unique role in bringing countries and the development community together. Without an independent budget, cabinet-level minister, and internationally-respected leaders, the UK's development programme would lack the capacity to mobilise resources as quickly and effectively in response to future crises. Nor will it have pride of place internationally as a source of soft power.

Even nationalists must confront the security threats posed by fragile states, the explosion of refugee numbers, and the continuing scourge of poverty and injustice. When today's most pressing global challenges—from climate change to inequality and violent conflict—do not admit of unilateral solutions, the case for multilateral action is unanswerable. A robust, institutionally independent, and well-financed DFID is needed now more than ever.

So, while Johnson is anticipating that a post-Brexit UK will need a much stronger FCO to maintain the country's influence abroad, the relegation of DFID would undermine an even more important post-Brexit imperative—maintaining our global leadership, not least in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals agreed by all UN member states.

Gordon Brown, former Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer of the United Kingdom, is United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education and Chair of the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity.

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QUOTABLE Quote

MUHAMMAD ALI
(1942–2016)
American professional boxer, activist, and philanthropist

It's the repetition of affirmations that leads to belief. And once that belief becomes a deep conviction, things begin to happen.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Blubbers

6 Less refined

11 Concur

12 Blow away

13 Occupy the throne

14 Skating category

15 Salsa legend

Puente

17 Sports figure

18 Fortitude

20 Lucy's love

22 Author Deighton

23 Payback

26 Protractor's measure

28 Trimmed

29 Spoiled, perhaps

31 Media mogul

Turner

32 Resting on

33 Like some Chardonnays

34 Priestly garb

36 Archaeologist's find

38 Recital highlights

40 Trappers' wares

43 Alaskan native

44 Operative

45 Ashen

46 Survives

DOWN

1 Butter unit

2 Period

3 Desks' cousins

4 Bona fide

5 Transmitted

6 Grammys category

7 Stockpiled

8 Bistro job

9 Financier Cornell

10 Take it easy

16 Poem of praise

18 Pleased

19 Gambling city

21 Smooth

23 Make over

24 Social misfit

25 Water whirl

27 Releases

30 Make a choice

33 Letter after psi

34 Memo letters

35 "Damn Yankees" role

37 Milky stone

39 Pig's home

41 Blasting stuff

42 Ave. crossers

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

M	A	C	E	B	O	R	D	E	R
U	P	O	N	L	I	E	D	T	O
L	E	W	D	O	L	D	S	A	W
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V	A	L	E	T	S	A	U	C	Y
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I	M	P	E	N	D	S	E	L	L
G	U	E	S	T	S	T	R	O	Y

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott