

# "I am only making a modest contribution to the struggle of my people"

*Veteran political leader and a key member of the advisory council of Bangladesh's government- -in- exile during the War of Independence, Professor Muzaffar Ahmed passed away on August 23, 2019. In remembrance of the political leader, we are reprinting his interview which was originally published in Pakistan Forum, a US-based journal brought out by some left-leaning intellectuals of Pakistani origin, in its October 1971 issue. The interview was taken by Pakistan Forum's editor Feroz Ahmed in New York. In the interview, Muzaffar Ahmed talked about some key issues relating to strategic and ideological aspects of the liberation struggle such as formation of a united front, the role of the leftist parties, anti-imperialist character of the war and the future of Bangladesh as an independent country.*

**Feroz Ahmed (F. A.):** Let me begin with a question concerning a recent development in the East Bengal independence movement, i.e., the formation of a consultative committee consisting of the Awami League, your party and three other parties. Do you think that it is a significant development?

**Muzaffar Ahmed (M. A.):** Yes, it is.

**F. A.: In what sense?**

**M. A.:** It signifies the disillusionment of the pro-Western elements of the movement with the Western countries, especially the United States. It reinforces anti-imperialist tendencies in the movement. As you know, the four non-Awami League members of the committee, i.e., Maulana Bhashani, Moni Singh, Manoranjan Dhar and myself, are all strongly anti-imperialist.

**F. A.: Was it easy for the Awami League to accept the idea of a multi-party committee and to include the leftist parties in it?**

**M. A.:** It may not have been easy but the decision was dictated by practical politics. Whenever the Awami League leaders went to the socialist and non-aligned nations for support, they were asked about the anti-imperialist content in our independence movement. Besides, there was growing demand in Bangladesh and among overseas Bengalis for the formation of a united front.

**F. A.: It is interesting that the formation of the consultative committee immediately followed the signing of the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty. Is it a manifestation of the growing Soviet influence over the Bangladesh movement?**

**M. A.:** The fact that it followed and did not precede the signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty does not prove anything. Co-ordination of the independence struggle was essential and it took the necessary time for the formation of the committee.

**F. A.: There is a widespread belief that the inclusion of the three leftist parties in the committee is the price paid by the Awami League and the Indian government for Soviet assurance against possible belligerent moves by the Pakistani army?**

**M. A.:** That may be your interpretation. There are others who say that the leftist parties have been included in the committee to create a red scare and to secure support from the imperialist nations. Both allegations are unfounded.

**F. A.: Before I ask you more questions about the composition of the consultative committee, would you please tell me what the status of the committee is. Is it now the supreme body of the Bangladesh movement? Does it supersede the Provisional Government?**

**M. A.:** The consultative committee has been formed with the purpose of coordinating the activities of the different groups engaged in fighting the West Pakistani army. It is a step towards the formation of a united front. Its relationship with the Provisional Government is not clearly defined. Ideally, the Provisional Government should have been formed at a later stage after the formation of United Front. But as it already exists, we have to work with it. The decisions of the Consultative Committee are not legally binding on the Provisional Government but because of its composition the decisions of the committee cannot be turned down by the Provisional Government. Two important members of the Provisional Government, i.e., Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed and Foreign Minister Khondkar Mushtaque Ahmed, are also in the Consultative Committee. If we can make this committee function properly, then the Provisional Government might be subordinated to it, or assigned to tasks other than directing the armed struggle.

**F. A.: There is something peculiar about the composition of the Consultative Committee. The Bangladesh National Congress is a part of it, but before the Military crackdown, the Congress took a position that the Awami League represented the minority communities adequately and that there was no need of putting up a separate slate of Hindu candidates. It ran only four token candidates against the Awami League. Now, because of the actions of the Muslim military of Pakistan and the dependence of the Awami League on India, the Awami League is being driven more and more toward secular slogans and probably represents the minorities more adequately than before. Why, all of a sudden, has the need arisen for separate representation for the Hindu minority?**

**M. A.:** The minority voted for the Awami League for the sake of expediency. The real leadership of the Hindu community resided with the Congress. Furthermore, there was no unanimous support for the idea of not contesting against the Awami League. Now, in view of the special problems of the Hindu refugees and the need for unity in our ranks, we feel that the Congress, which can relate well to the Hindu community, should be given representation in the committee and in the United Front which might follow from it.

**F. A.: I see that your party The National Awami Party and the Bangladesh Communist Party have both been included in the committee. What is the difference between the two?**

**M. A.:** The Communist Party, led by Moni Singh, is a working-class Party which wants independent national democracy, while our party is a multi-class party struggling for parliamentary democracy and full regional autonomy.

**F. A.: That was before March 25, 1971. Now the military has made the question of autonomy irrelevant.**

**M. A.:** Yes, we no longer demand autonomy. We want complete independence.

**F. A.: So does the Communist Party. How do you differ now?**

**M. A.:** The essential difference is still there. The Communist Party would like to introduce independent national democracy in accordance with the concept developed at the Moscow conference of 81 Communist Parties in 1960. We, being a multi-class party, which includes some progressive *jotedars* (landlords) and businessmen in addition to workers, peasants and students etc, are striving for the establishment of parliamentary democracy.

**F. A.: Even after independence has been won by means of a protracted armed struggle?**

**M. A.:** Yes.

**F. A.: How do you differ from the Awami League then?**

**M. A.:** We stand for independence, secularism, parliamentary democracy and eventually socialism.

**F. A.: The Awami League says that it also stands for the very same ideals.**

**M. A.:** The Awami League's maximum programme is our minimum programme. We would like to go further than that and to lay the foundations of socialism.

**F. A.: Have you defined your socialism differently from the Awami League's?**

**M. A.:** Before the military action, the members and supporters of the NAP advocated socialism as their ultimate aim but did not spell out what it was and how to achieve it. Since March 25, our party has not met. So, I cannot tell you what our revised programme is. I can only speak in an individual capacity. Again, when the Awami League includes socialism in its programme, you should not simply go by the paper. In Pakistani politics there is no limit to the promises you can make and the slogans you can use. The rightist parties have out-bid the leftist parties in proposing limits on land-holding.

**F. A.: Am I correct in saying that at this stage there is little, or no, difference between your party and the Awami League?**

**M. A.:** Yes. But you must also recognise the fact that the Awami League leadership is reluctant to expose imperialism, whereas we are staunchly anti-imperialist.

**F. A.: Why is the Awami League reluctant?**

**M. A.:** Because of their experience and class character.

**F. A.: Do you think that disillusionment with the imperialist powers will bring the Awami League even closer to you and make it an anti-imperialist force?**

**M. A.:** The Awami League is not monolithic. The pro-Western tendencies are to be found in their parliamentary leadership. There are other elements in the party, especially the youth and the students, who are becoming increasingly anti-imperialist. Then there are those who are fighting in Bangladesh against the Pakistan Army. There is a contradiction but not conflict between the fighting forces and the parliamentary leadership. That contradiction might develop into a conflict.

**F. A.: I shall come back to the question of relevance of a parliamentary party to armed struggle. Let me first satisfy my curiosity about the composition of the Consultative Committee. We have already talked about four of the five parties included in the committee. The fifth is the National Awami Party led by Maulana Bhashani.**

**M. A.:** Maulana Bhashani does not have a party anymore. He is an immensely popular figure and he supports the struggle for independence. Therefore, he must be included in the committee. But the elements of the National Awami Party who had gone with him after the initial split in the party in 1963 have all abandoned him. Even his secretary, Masihur Rahman, has joined the People's Party, the majority party in West Pakistan, led by Z. A. Bhutto. I had to lend the services of one of our members to Maulana for helping him out in secretarial work.

**F. A.: There have been reports that Maulana Bhashani has been incarcerated by the Indian authorities. If these reports are correct then Maulana's inclusion in the committee is only for ceremonial or exploitative purposes.**

**M. A.:** These reports are completely unfounded. The Maulana moves around freely, goes to

Bangladesh, attends our meetings... Here I have a newspaper clipping saying that Bhashani is in Peking, trying to seek Chinese support for our independence struggle.

**F. A.: You say that Maulana does not have any organisation at the moment. That may very well be true. The elements who formed the backbone of his organisation are still there. Why are not they included in the Consultative Committee?**

**M. A.:** They are split into as many as eleven factions. How do you grant them representation? Some of them do not represent anyone except themselves and the Maulana says he represents them in the committee.

**F. A.: But it is obvious that he does not. If you are interested in a genuine National Liberation Front, don't you think that these elements must be accommodated?**

**M. A.:** The decision to give them representation does not lie with me. Besides, only three of these eleven groups support the independence struggle.

**F. A.: Which ones?**

**M. A.:** The groups identified as: (a) Zafar-Memon, (b) Nasim Ali and (c) Serajul Hossain Khan.

**F. A.: As you know, the radical left groups, consisting of Bhashani NAP, Zafar-Memon group, Deben Sikdar group, Hatjar group, and several workers', peasants' and students' organisations, have formed a coordinating committee for Bangladesh National Liberation Struggle.**

**M. A.:** There is no discrimination on the basis of ideology. Bhashani still claims to be a friend of Mao. Any group which is organised and which is fighting for our independence can be included in the committee.

**F. A.: You said earlier that only three minor groups support the independence movement and now you are implying that the radical left is not organised.**

**M. A.:** Only one group has some organisation and following and that is the Toha-Abdul Haq-Dastidar group which calls itself the East Pakistan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist). Although they consider us their enemies and attach all kinds of labels to us, I must be honest in acknowledging that they have been in the working-class struggle for a long time and they do command some significant following.

**F. A.: What are they doing? Are they fighting the Pakistani army?**

**M. A.:** No. Following the Maoist line, they have refused to support the independence struggle. They say that it is a struggle between the West Pakistani monopolist capitalists and the East Pakistani nascent bourgeoisie and that they will not have any part in it.

**F. A.: So what are they doing? Sitting it out? Collaborating with the Army?**

**M. A.:** They have organised some guerrilla bands and killed several *jotedars* (landlords) and distributed land to the peasants. But when the Pakistan Army came, they ran away. They are waging a "class war" in a land occupied by

tion of Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan. How did the Awami League, a parliamentary party dedicated to non-violent struggle for the limited goal of autonomy, find itself in the middle of an armed struggle for independence?

**M. A.:** I have failed to understand the minds of Pakistan's military leaders. If you know them any better, perhaps you can help me in solving some mysteries.

**F. A.: Would you say that independence and armed struggle were imposed upon East Bengal by the Army?**

**M. A.:** Yes. Between March 1 and March 25, the six-point demand was transformed into a one-point demand, i.e. independence. In order to understand this, you have to know the peculiarities of the East Bengali soil. The middle class sets the political tone. Because of its strong links with the countryside its ideas quickly diffuse among the peasantry. When General Yahya Khan arbitrarily postponed the National Assembly session on March 1 and blamed the Bengali leaders in his speech of March 6, the middle class became convinced that the military had no intention of transferring power to the elected representatives. From then on, the demand for independence became the rallying cry.

**F. A.: Did Mujib ever raise the slogan of independence?**

**M. A.:** Yes, he did. In his March ' speech when he said that ours was a struggle for the liberation of Bangladesh the people shouted "independence." He then said that it was a struggle for our independence.

**F. A.: But Maulana Bhashani was the first person to demand independence?**

**M. A.:** That is not correct. He called for the implementation of The Lahore resolution and the creation of two Pakistans.

**F. A.: The Lahore resolution envisaged independent and sovereign states. Doesn't the implementation of the Lahore resolution amount to granting independence to East Bengal?**

**M. A.:** It does not. That demand is not very different from the demand for autonomy. In fact, our party was the first to demand independence when I gave the call on March 3.

**F. A.: Is your March 3 speech on record?**

**M. A.:** Yes.

**F. A.: Your party was committed to a non-violent struggle for autonomy within Pakistan. Did you find yourself unprepared for the situation created by the military action?**

**M. A.:** Yes. We had never imagined that the Army would go to that extent for suppressing the autonomy movement.

**F. A.: Does that prove your short-sightedness?**

**M. A.:** Yes. Indeed, we were short-sighted.

**F. A.: Now that the Army has made autonomy and parliamentary struggle irrelevant, how do you characterise the present stage of the struggle?**

**M. A.:** It is a struggle for the national self-determination of the people of Bangladesh. It is anti-monopolist and anti-imperialist in character.

**F. A.: Anti-imperialist in what sense?**

**M. A.:** In the sense that the Pakistan army is an instrument of U. S. imperialism and a strong Pakistan is helpful in the imperialist drive for the "containment" of the Soviet Union and China. By fighting the Pakistani army, we are weakening the imperialist stranglehold in the region.

**F. A.: You have emphasised the "anti-monopolist" character of the movement. Earlier you said that your objective was to achieve parliamentary democracy after independence has been won. Why are you so keen about bourgeois economic and political institutions?**

**M. A.:** Because the consciousness among the masses is not developed to a level where socialist ideology can be accepted by them.

**F. A.: What kind of relationship will independent Bangladesh have with West Pakistan?**

**M. A.:** What will be there to relate with? At best we can have the same kind of relationship with them as with Afghanistan. Given the differences in our economy and culture and the bitter memories of exploitation and oppression, nothing more can be expected.

**F. A.: It is almost time. Let me ask this last question. It is being said in many quarters that with the signing of the Indo-Soviet pact and indications of Soviet support for Bangladesh, the Bangladesh movement is coming under increased Soviet influence. Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, leader of the pro-Moscow NAP, a revisionist who is not totally unacceptable to India and who had already been included in the Consultative Committee and in the Bangladesh delegation to the UN, is the man to watch. What is your reaction to that?**

**M. A.:** Watch if you like. But what am I? I am only making a modest contribution to the struggle of my people. I do not overestimate myself.

*This is a shortened version of the interview. The full version is available on The Daily Star's website.*



Muzaffar Ahmed (1922-2019)

**M. A.:** As I said, they do not have any organisation and they represent only a few individuals. Now they want to make a mini United Front of their own, without the Awami League...

**F. A.: In their June 1 declaration they have clearly called for a National Liberation Front consisting of all political forces, including the Awami League. What is your basis for saying that they want to exclude the Awami League?**

**M. A.:** They talk about United Front but in practice they are striving for an all-left front. You are attaching unnecessary importance to these elements. Most of them have been my students and I know what kind of organisations they have. The less you talk about them the better it is.

**F. A.: How is it that Bhashani NAP maintains membership in their coordinating committee as well as in your consultative committee?**

**M. A.:** Maulana has repudiated them in a statement he issued recently. They have only been using his name. You know that Maulana Bhashani is a peculiar phenomenon in Bengal politics. He is like a *pipal* tree under which all kinds of weeds grow.

**F. A.: The consultative committee, as constituted at present, consists of parties which have the reputation of being either pro-Indian or pro-Moscow. Is it the ideological orientation of the other left groups, the Maoist label, that has kept them out of the Consultative Committee?**

foreign forces. They don't talk about fighting the invaders.

**F. A.: They don't want to be in a National Liberation Front with you?**

**M. A.:** That's correct.

**F. A.: But the other so-called Maoists who have given a call for the formation of a NLF, why don't you want to co-operate with them?**

**M. A.:** I have already said that only three groups have so far approached me. We cannot possibly give each one of them separate representation. If they come united, the members of the Consultative Committee can consider their case. I do not know if they have contacted the Awami League leaders.

**F. A.: What is their fighting capacity?**

**M. A.:** I don't know of their fighting capacity. All these reports in the Western press about their having thousands of guerrillas under their command are absurd. These reports are only intended for creating "red" - phobia and scaring away non-Communist support or inviting imperialist intervention. I am saying this not because I am opposed to them but because that is the truth. I am disturbed about the amount of ignorance about Bangladesh that prevails in the Western countries.

**F. A.: I see you don't feel very happy discussing the radical left groups. Let us move on to another topic. There is considerable confusion regarding the events that led up to the military action and the declara-**